



## An Update Report on *Vibrant Parish Life* January, 2005

This Update Report on *Vibrant Parish Life* summarizes some of our diocese's learnings and accomplishments through this initiative, and introduces current efforts for sustaining this work.

*Vibrant Parish Life* is centered in Bishop Pilla's hope that "we will do all that is possible to sustain and enhance the vibrant parish life to which Jesus calls us - for every parishioner and for our priests and parish ministers." It is a call for our local Church to engage more fully in collaborative ministry – building on what we have done, and doing things in new ways that we have not done before. This process relies on the wisdom, judgment and cooperation of local parish leaders, acting with diocesan support and resources, to discern and develop the ministries and services that can best serve both the individual and common good of parishes.

### **Historical Overview**

In February 2001, Bishop Pilla promulgated his *Vibrant Parish Life* Pastoral Letter. To guide the implementation, the Bishop established a Diocesan Task Force with representatives from a broad cross-section of diocesan life. This group directly involved over 90 people, including members of committees. The initial implementation followed a three-step process: education, self-study, and preparation for further collaboration. Parish education resources and training for Self-Studies began in Lent, 2002. Over 3000 people attended training sessions over a 15 month period. In the Self-Study phase during 2002-2003, parishes did an in-depth listening process with parishioners, and a careful assessment of staffing, ministries, demographics, finances, facilities and liturgy in a spirit of prayer and discernment. The parish VPL Coordinating Team, parish staff and pastoral council then jointly discerned their parish's areas of greatest vibrancy, areas of challenge to enhance parish life, and areas most appropriate for collaboration with other parishes, which they reported in their Composite Summary. In the fall and winter of 2003-2004, Confab meetings were held in each district, using responses from the Composite Summary forms from each parish to identify breakout sessions of greatest interest.

### **Areas of Greatest Interest for Collaboration among Parishes**

As a result of the Confabs attended by almost 2000 parish leaders, breakout sessions led to the formation of 131 Ministry Leadership Teams (MLTs), which met at least twice more to identify areas of possible collaboration among parishes. The work of the MLTs represents an unprecedented level of participation in exploring collaboration among parishes and in involving lay leaders. As of August, 2004, about half of the MLTs were still meeting to better serve the common good in specific areas of ministry. The areas of highest interest for collaboration among parishes are as follows, ranked by greatest frequency:

- Youth and Young Adult Ministry
- Adult Faith Formation / Education
- Social Concerns / Social Action
- Evangelization
- Ministry to Senior Adults
- Bereavement
- Children's Religious Education
- RCIA
- Liturgical Sharing
- Divorced / Separated Ministry
- Catholic Elementary Schools.

The Parish Composite Summaries from 181 parishes provide *the most significant look at issues related to parish vibrancy that our diocese has ever assembled*, based on the extent of listening efforts, assessment work, and collaboration among the VPL Coordinating Team, parish pastoral council and parish staff in discerning these Summaries.

### **Areas of Vibrancy in Parishes**

Based on a review of the Parish Composite Summary reports from the Self-Studies, the 11 areas most often identified as having the greatest vibrancy in our parishes are ranked below, in the order of greatest frequency. They serve as essential qualities of a vibrant parish.

- Celebration of the Eucharist, with great value placed on liturgies that are prayerful, reverent and spiritually moving, with good preaching and music.
- Religious formation for children accomplished through the Parish School of Religion and Catholic Elementary School.
- Outreach to people who are poor and in need in the surrounding community, through food programs, St. Vincent DePaul Societies, financial support and collaboration with community organizations.
- A spirit of care, welcome and hospitality extended to parish members and to new people.
- Effective leadership reflected in an openness to listen to people, vision and good management, beginning with the pastor and parish staff, and developed through parish groups and organizations.
- Maintaining quality facilities for parish worship, meetings and ministries.
- Stewardship of parishioners who are willing to take responsibility, and are dedicated, enthusiastic, generous and committed to the good of the parish and its ministries.
- Youth ministry that engages young people in a range of activities: worship, formation, service, CYO sports, scouting.
- Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).
- Ministry to the sick, shut-ins/homebound and elderly.
- Ministries that promote prayer and spiritual growth, including Adoration Chapels, devotions, and retreats.

### **Areas of Challenge to Enhance Parish Life**

The Composite Summaries were also studied to identify where parishes most wanted to develop and enhance parish life and ministry. The 11 areas most often identified are listed in the order of greatest frequency, and reflect key needs to address in enhancing the vibrancy of parish life.

- Adult faith formation and religious education that fosters spiritual growth.
- Youth and young adult ministry – creating programs that meet their social and spiritual needs, and increase their presence at Mass and in ministerial / leadership roles.
- Outreach to inactive Catholics and the unchurched living in our communities.
- Parishioner involvement in the ministerial life of the church.
- Effective communication: between leaders and parishioners, among parish groups, as well as about the many ministries and services which the parish provides.
- Being more welcoming and hospitable to visitors and those new to the community.
- Active outreach to those with special needs (e.g., divorced/separated, single parents, persons with disabilities, etc.).
- Creating a more vibrant liturgy where parishioners understand, appreciate, and participate fully.
- Advocating for social justice and engaging in social action in the community.
- Programs that strengthen and foster family life and family-based faith formation.
- Financial giving and financial stability – increasing Offertory contributions and effectively managing parish finances.

As can be seen, the areas of vibrancy in some parishes are the greatest areas of challenge and growth for other parishes. This point reinforces the importance of certain qualities as essential to a vibrant parish life.

## Ongoing Implementation of the *Vibrant Parish Life* initiative

- **Ministry Leadership Teams**

Teams representing clusters of parishes, and even entire districts, continue to meet. They plan and provide specific ministries and programs, and maintain networks of ongoing communication and mutual support. Meeting together was frequently viewed as a positive, energizing experience, even for MLTs that decided to disband. Many more lay people have been engaged in collaborative conversations. Communication networks that did not exist before have been created.

- **Parish Planning and follow-up**

Parish pastoral councils and parish staffs have used the results of the Self-Study and Composite Summary for pastoral planning, goal setting and developing ministries.

- **Fostering a collaborative mentality in addressing all kinds of pastoral activities**

People expressed hope in seeing the good that could come out of sharing and collaboration. Developing an increasingly 'collaborative culture' within the diocese and among our parishes is central to the *Vibrant Parish Life* initiative. It is becoming more evident that without collaboration, it will not be possible to sustain many needed ministries and services. Various informal and exploratory conversations and initiatives continue to unfold. These efforts build on existing collaboration or seek to explore new possibilities based on areas of common good and mutual benefit. They include cooperation among parishes, schools, *The Church in the City* partnerships, Catholic Charities agencies, religious communities, and other community organizations. Any number of pastors, staff members and parish leaders have said 'we are talking about possibilities for working together that would not have been possible three years ago.'

### Where do we go from here?

The *Vibrant Parish Life* initiative focused primarily on the parish. Bishop Pilla wrote, "although the parish is not the only setting in which people experience the Church, it is a touchstone for all other ecclesial experiences ... 'as the parish goes, so goes the faith of the people.' ... If the Church is to flourish in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we must offer, maintain, and support a vibrant parish life for every Catholic." The initial implementation process asked parishes to focus on areas of vibrancy and challenge in their own life, and to identify areas where they were open to collaboration with other parishes.

Some have said that "*Vibrant Parish Life* is over." Yet much remains to be done to create and sustain "a vibrant parish life for every Catholic and for our priests and parish ministers" over the coming years.

We now need to focus more broadly on the effective presence of the Church and its ministries within overall districts and the diocese.

We need to better address the adequate staffing (i.e. priests, deacons, & lay ecclesial ministers) of parishes. This critical need is particularly acute with regard to the future assignment of priests.

The Pastoral Letter laid out a process through 2004. A Sustaining *Vibrant Parish Life* Committee was convened in August of 2004. It includes representatives of parish staffs from each district, diocesan consultative groups and diocesan staff. Its role is to review what is happening, and to discern the further needs, deeper issues and planning to fulfill the vision of the Pastoral Letter.

**In its initial deliberations, the Sustaining *Vibrant Parish Life* Committee has identified some of the following points as deeper issues for further conversation and planning.**

- Continued education of people in the diocese, especially the laity, so they better understand the reality of the situation we face, the need for change and a vision for going forward.
- Adequate staffing of our parishes in the future given the reality of our current situation.
- Further leadership training, specifically in collaboration, delegation and communication.
- Generating greater involvement and acceptance of the laity in parish ministry.
- More preparation for and use of the roles of business managers and parish life coordinators.
- More diocesan leadership, resources and training to help parishes to address tough decision-making that will lead to more vibrant and stable parish and schools for the next 5-10 years.
- Development of new models and resources to facilitate the creation of staffing plans for multiple parishes working together in an integrated and collaborative manner.
- Better promotion of priestly vocations.

**As we approach further planning with regard to parish staffing, the following points are helpful in understanding diocesan practices regarding the assignment of priests.**

These points are taken from a presentation by Fr. Lawrence Jurcak, Secretary and Vicar for Clergy and Religious, at the October 2004 Presbyteral Convocation. They offer some context for what is currently taking place and for use in further planning. Fr. Jurcak can be contacted for a more detailed paper outlining these points. This information will be used more extensively in future educational efforts.

- Priests sharing a residence (one rectory) to develop an intentional community which nurtures priesthood, and offers mutual support and a more healthy environment than living alone.
- Having fewer, or only one, Sunday Mass at certain parishes so the priest assigned there can celebrate weekend Mass(es) elsewhere with communities that need multiple Sunday Masses.
- Dual assignments in which a priest has more than one ministry during the week and/ or assists with weekend Mass(es) at one or more other parishes / institutions.
- Dual assignments in which a priest assigned to one parish or ministry also serves as a Presbyteral Moderator of another parish served by a Parish Life Coordinator (10 parishes at this time).
- Continued active sacramental and liturgical ministry of "senior priests" past the age of retirement (70).
- Priests from foreign countries who serve newly emerging immigrant communities and/or newly arrived immigrants from Europe in their native language and culture.
- Priests assigned to a "pastoral team" with lay ecclesial ministers to serve several parish communities that come could together as a "cluster of parishes".
- Closing or consolidating parish communities in a collaborative and consultative manner in order for people to become part of new, more vibrant and more stable parishes.

**Listed below are key points regarding the assignment of priests as of January 1, 2005.**

- Our 233 parishes are served as follows: 144 parishes with 1 priest, 45 parishes with 2 priests, 13 parishes with 3 priests, and 1 parish with 4 priests. There are 4 team parishes, 16 parishes entrusted to religious orders, and 10 parishes with Parish Life Coordinators.
- Parishes range in size from under 100 households to almost 5000 households, with an average of 1300 households.
- A parish typically is not assigned more than 1 priest until it reaches 2100 households.
- Regarding ages of priests, our diocese has 433 diocesan priests, as follows: 31 priests age 40 and younger, 76 priests from 41-50, 126 priests from 51-60, 77 priests from 61-69, and 123 priests age 70 and older. Of the priests over the retirement age of 70, 27 are active in full-time ministry.