

Prioritization of Pastoral Concerns

Diocesan Pastoral Council

March 5, 2011

In the summer of 2009 Bishop Doran requested the Diocesan Pastoral Council to identify areas of pastoral concerns and make recommendations to him about them. This work was largely completed at the September 11, 2010 meeting and unanimously approved at the March 5, 2011 meeting.

The Council reviewed 11 concerns, accompanied by recommendations that were raised by the body in 2003. It then used a Prioritization Matrix System to identify the most important concerns that remain unaddressed. The top four pastoral concerns, ranked in order of importance, are listed here. In each section the 2010 recommendations are preceded by narratives from the original 2003 document and the responses the Rockford Diocese provided in 2009.

Priority 1. Youth Ministry

2003 DPC Pastoral Concerns. Adolescence is a unique time in one's life when a person learns to make personal choices. It is crucial in a person's faith development that he or she incorporates the wisdom of the Church in these choices. Youth ministry, therefore, should have a high priority for all parishes; it is not an "optional extra." Likewise, parishes should not lower the age of Confirmation as a way of avoiding the obligation of providing good youth ministry.

Following *Renewing the Vision: a Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops), goals for ministry with adolescents should include: 1) empowering young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in our world today; 2) drawing young people to responsible participation in the life, mission, and work of the Catholic faith community; and 3) fostering the total personal and spiritual growth of each young person.

The components of a balanced youth ministry program include advocacy, catechesis, community life, evangelization, justice and service, leadership development, pastoral care, and prayer and worship.

2009 Responses of the Diocese. In 2006, the Office of Religious Education and Youth Ministry published the Comprehensive Youth Ministry Handbook and distributed it to all parishes and schools. It can be read on the Education Office website www.ceorockford.org. The handbook is based on the Eight Components from *Renewing the Vision* and is intended to assist parishes who have a thriving (or simply surviving) youth ministry.

Also, when the Office of Religious Education and Youth Ministry consults with parishes about parish ministry to youth, two themes are stressed: 1) is the parish youth friendly?; and 2) youth ministry is not a "youth" issue, but rather a broader ecclesial issue.

2010 DPC Pastoral Concerns and Recommendations. The USCCB document *Renewing the Vision: a Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* stressed three goal areas: 1) empowering young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in our world; 2) drawing young people to responsible participation in the life, mission, and work of the Catholic faith community; and 3) fostering the total personal and spiritual growth of each young person. The basis for each of these goals is the necessity of developing Catholic skills and Catholic identity in youth.

Research shows that though the youth of today have an affection for core religious truths, they see themselves as religious, but not necessarily Catholic. In so doing, they are losing their need for the institutional Church. They feel God is already active and present in their lives, but they lack the Catholic skills and Catholic identity to function and be connected in their parish communities. In their eyes, simple assimilation into the church based on membership and attendance is not what defines a believer in God, yet alone an active Catholic. Today's youth does not equate membership with faithfulness, holiness, or being Catholic. Perhaps they are not sold on Church as community because they are not always viewed as part of the community.

We must focus on linking our youth with individuals who have a strong Catholic identity and the ability and willingness to articulate their Catholic faith. Youth need visible and practical examples being a part of a Catholic Church community, how to live their faith daily, and how to connect the sacraments to their daily needs. They need to see it in action on Sundays especially, but also flowing into their Monday through Saturday life. They need adults to mentor them and journey with them in modeling our Catholic faith to function within the community. Our youth are not the Church of tomorrow, but rather the young church of today. In making a serious commitment to this, we will begin to see Catholic youth active and present at Mass but also in all Church ministries, not just those that are contrived for them. A holistic friendly Catholic parish is a place where the sacraments, basic needs, concerns and wants of the adult and youth are embedded into the overall identity of the parish community in the mission of building up the Kingdom of God.

Priority 2. Stewardship of Talent

2003 DPC Pastoral Concerns. Parishes should emphasize the critical importance of stewardship and embrace the eight characteristics of a stewardship parish that the Diocese is promoting. Especially effective for parishes are witness talks by lay parishioners that are practicing stewardship.

2009 Responses of the Diocese. (Many of the responses dealt with the stewardship of treasure. The following responses addressed the general topic of stewardship or the stewardship of talent.)

The annual review of the three Diocesan Goals for the implementation of Stewardship in the Rockford Diocese occurs at the January meeting of the Stewardship Commission of the Diocese of Rockford. The review states that:

- 76 parishes have some form of stewardship leadership. Each of these parishes has established or is establishing Stewardship Commissions or advocates;
- 96 parishes present the Stewardship message in an on-going manner; and

- 92 parishes are presenting a Stewardship of Time & Talent Appeal. Some of the smaller parishes are only conducting this appeal every other year as that best suits their real needs.

2010 DPC Pastoral Concerns and Recommendations. Many parishes are working to promote the stewardship of treasure. There seems to be considerable room for improvement, however, in implementing the stewardship of talent. Without a widespread sharing of lay talent it is likely that any progress made in the fields of evangelization and “Building the Parish Community” will be minimal and short-lived. A proper implementation of the stewardship of talent should begin with an annual time and talent survey of parishioners.

In their Pastoral Letter “Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response” the US Bishops state: “Only by living as generous stewards of these local Christian communities, their parishes, can the Catholic of the United States hope to make them the vital sources of faith-filled Christian dynamism they are meant to be.”

The ministries and services the parish provides can be enhanced by involving as many registered parishioners as possible. This can be accomplished through personal invitation, time and talent surveys, and clear communication of the volunteer opportunities available. This balanced approach offers the most effective method to expand the volunteer base while focusing on the spirituality of Christian Discipleship.

Priority 3. Relational Skills of Priests

2003 DPC Pastoral Concerns. Many of the concerns expressed about priests by the Diocesan Pastoral Council would be alleviated if pastors could simply sit at a table with lay people and listen to their concerns without feeling threatened or becoming defensive. It would be useful if the Diocese could assist priests in improving their relational skills and developing models of good communication. N.B., developing good relational skills is a lifetime process and should not be reduced to a “gimmick” to pacify the laity.

2009 Responses of the Diocese. The Diocese is attempting to address this issue through workshops and conferences, especially for the junior clergy, priests that have been ordained five years or fewer. The current junior clergy seem to be receptive to the efforts.

2010 DPC Pastoral Concerns and Recommendations. Workshops and conferences designed to improve the relational skills of priests should remind participants of a key stewardship point: the parish functionally belongs to the people. It is within the context of the parish that the laity are received into the Church, live out their lives, and receive their final commendations. Compared to many laity, priests stay in a parish for a relatively short period of time. Everything that a priest does should show this sense of proportionality. While it is permissible for priests to use the shortcut “my parish” in identifying parishioners and facilities, they should never lose sight of the fact that they are temporary stewards.

A formal pastoral evaluation process could aid in identifying priests with relational skills that are deficient. Such a process should be conducted one year after assignment to a parish, rather than waiting

the customary six years. Areas for improvement could then be identified and modified for the benefit of the priest and the parish.

The new edition of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal asks the Conference of Bishops in each country to determine the posture to be used for the reception of Communion and the act of reverence to be made by each person as he or she receives Communion. The Conference of Bishops of the United States has determined that in this country Communion will be received standing and that a bow will be the act of reverence made by those receiving. Those who receive Communion may receive either in the hand or on the tongue, and the decision should be that of the individual receiving, not of the person distributing Communion. Therefore no priest should display any form of negative judgment when a communicant receives the Host either in the hand or on the tongue, even if the method is contrary to the priest's personal preference. Similarly, no priest should restrict participation to males in any liturgical function in which females are permitted to serve. These, and similar, practices hamper good relationships with parishioners.

Priority 4. Building a Parish Community

2003 DPC Pastoral Concerns. Building a vibrant parish community takes time and attention. The goal is to create such a positive atmosphere of faith that each parishioner can clearly articulate and share with others "why it is good to be a member of this parish."

There are no shortcuts to creating a solid foundation and crafting the parish structures that are necessary. One of the most important actions that a pastor can take is to develop a strong parish pastoral council and commissions. This can help create relationships that go far beyond the monthly council meeting, and develop lay parish leaders.

Hospitality, or the lack of it, is perceived immediately upon walking into a church. Every parish should have designated greeters to welcome everyone who enters. It is also advisable to have an official welcoming committee to visit new parishioners and create ways to include them in parish life. Other ways to reach out include distributing material on parish activities and ministries, and sponsoring a "Parish Ministry Day."

2009 Responses of the Diocese. In a recent survey of pastors, the vast majority indicated that they have active pastoral councils that do not need additional training. The diocesan Pastoral Council Training Committee reviewed the results and expressed skepticism about the implications. While most pastors may believe their councils are sufficiently trained, local experience indicates this is very unlikely to be true. The Diocese currently offers several types of pastoral council training and 20 parishes took part in 2009.

It is unknown to what degree parishes have improved hospitality.

2010 DPC Pastoral Concerns and Recommendations. Research has shown that having active finance councils and pastoral councils correlates well with overall parish vitality. The 1983 Code of Canon Law mandated the existence of a finance council in each parish, while the Fourth Synod of the Diocese of

Rockford (2002) formally mandated the existence of a pastoral council. Existence, however, does not guarantee usage; much less does it guarantee optimal usage. We recommend that conciliar structures be supported in parishes by: 1) providing quality training opportunities; and 2) encouraging pastors to attend such training with their councils. While any one training event may be considered optional, it is expected that pastors periodically will attend such events.