

Parish-Based Planning

Diocesan Research and Planning Office
March 2003

(This article was written for *The Observer* near the beginning of the Parish Consultations Process in 1997. Its focus is as relevant in 2003 as it was in 1997.)

At first glance the Parish Consultations Process looks like a large-scale diocesan planning process. After all, without diocesan structure, assets and leadership there would be no *With a Heart Renewed*. The diocese trained parish coordinators, recruited and trained facilitators for parish meetings, and provided leadership through diocesan representatives for cluster meetings. The diocese also designed the parishioner survey, analyzed the results and gave each parish about 200-pages of survey data.

Yet, in spite of the heavy diocesan investment of resources, *With a Heart Renewed* is essentially a parish-based planning process. To understand this statement is to grasp *the* essential element of diocesan-sponsored processes like the PCP. Bishop Robert Lynch, Diocese of St. Petersburg, spoke at a conference about these matters several months ago.

“Planning can, and should, happen at many different levels. All too often in the church, it either doesn’t happen at all, its scope is too limited, or it is conducted at the diocesan level and is forced upon the parishes. Ideally, parishes would take the responsibility to plan for themselves and look to the diocese for guidance or assistance. As I look around the country, I see many dioceses that have initiated planning studies of one kind or another and have encouraged pastoral planning at the parish level. Although different . . . they encourage the establishment of local planning committees, and though in very different ways, they all ask . . . three basic planning questions: where are we now, where do we want to be in the future, and how are we going to get there?”

I see the Parish Consultations Process as the beginning of wide-scale, parish-based planning in the Rockford Diocese. Planning should happen at the parish level because no one else is closer to the needs of local Catholics. In fact the principle of subsidiarity requires that needs be met at the most local level possible. The Diocese can help parishes but parishes need to be the prime movers in planning. Parishes should be quite active in planning even when the Parish Consultations Process is a long-faded memory.

As Bishop Lynch implies, planning need not be complicated because there are only three essential questions. The first (“where are we now?”) requires that we understand well our current situation. This means we keep closely in touch with the hopes and fears of our parishioners. It also means we understand the changing demographic realities that surround many of our parishes.

The second question is “where do we want to be in the future?” This is more difficult because it involves dreaming a preferable future, an action that many pragmatic people find difficult. Yet, as the saying goes, “if you do not know where you are going, any road will take you there.”

The last question is “how are we going to get there.” This is difficult and sometimes tedious as we try to move from our reality to the vision. This step involves identifying goals to move us toward the vision, and then writing objectives to help accomplish the goals. It also means much consultation with the people in the pew so that our plans are not elitist.

Help is available from the Diocese, of course, at each step of the planning process. Nevertheless, the prime emphasis should be on parishes themselves taking the initiative for good planning.