

Mutual Ministry Review Report

Introduction -

How do we evaluate where we have been, where we are and where we are going? Are we achieving the goals we and our bishop have set? What is working, what is not working and how can we make our life together in the Diocese of Pittsburgh the best it can possibly be? The first step in the process is prayerful and honest thought and conversation.

On Saturday, September 28th, the three governance committees of the diocese facilitated the first Diocesan Mutual Ministry Review at Christ Church, North Hills. A Diocesan Mutual Ministry Review is a way to pause for a moment and prayerfully ask “How are we doing?” It is a time to evaluate where we are, celebrate what has been done well, and understand what might be done better as we seek to practice common and collaborative ministry in our diocese. By exploring reflective questions together, eighteen individuals, recruited for their involvement and expertise, focused on means of shared ministry accomplishments and proposed possible improvements within our three primary goal areas - Communication, Fellowship and Growth - as outlined by Bishop Ketlen in her 2023 address to Diocesan Convention.

The following sections, compiled by the facilitators, contain the details of each focus group conversation that took place.

Communications -

• What is the purpose of diocesan communication?

The purpose of diocesan communication is to share what is happening in and across the Diocese of Pittsburgh. The Bishop and Diocese have identified communication as a top priority and we affirm that this is an important aspect of our ministry together. Communication from the Diocese seems to communicate what the Diocese does for parish ministry, or what the Diocese can do that the parishes don't or can't do. Diocesan communication has to be both inward facing (sharing what is happening with our parishes and their parishioners) and outward facing (sharing what we are doing with our community, sharing the love of God with others.)

• What methods have we utilized in the past?

Grace Happens is our Diocesan email communication. Right now it seems that most communication is done through Grace Happens. (There is memory of a paper newsletters sent to parishes and parishioners.)

Website - central location for a lot of information that is both inward and outward facing.

Diocesan Facebook Page- Another resource for communication.

• How have these methods worked? What pitfalls have we encountered or may we encounter?

Grace Happens is very helpful. It often includes articles, upcoming events across the diocese, and photos of events that have taken place. Having it come more regularly would be helpful - same day, same time each week. This would further support our parishes communications efforts because they would know when to expect Grace Happens and could more regularly include announcements from it in parish communications. There was some wondering if there could be a version of Grace Happens sent just to parish communicators that might make sharing information from it easier with parish communications as well.

Website- Has a lot of information on it but it desperately needs to be updated..The website has news items from 2023 as well as photos of people who no longer serve in this diocese on the front page and this screams irrelevant.

Facebook - A lot of people are on Facebook so this is a good tool for sharing who we are within the diocese and community. One nice thing about Facebook is that if the page is managed well, our parishioners can “share” stories and events from it which empowers them to evangelize! The Diocesan Facebook page needs to be updated more regularly, right now the most recent item shared on this page is from over two weeks ago which is far too long ago in terms of how Facebook works.

• What resources can we identify to improve communication at the diocesan level?

Communications has been identified as a top value of the Diocese of Pittsburgh and so it must be funded and staffed accordingly. There are many people who specialize in communication and also places to be trained to strengthen our staff's skills. The parts of our communication that are lacking can be addressed with staff training and support.

Some parishes struggle with communications and it would be helpful if the diocese could continue to support these parishes in their efforts. Some parishes don't have a specific person appointed to do communications. Other churches have staff members who handle communications. There is a wide variety of needs from our parishes and we wondered if we are serving them all right now. We don't know exactly what that might

look like - an informal monthly Zoom? Training sessions on elements of communication? Something else? But having more resources to support communications would be helpful.

• How do Growth, Communication and Fellowship interact within our diocese to promote the well being of our diocese?

Communication is key in promoting the well being of our diocese. Right now it seems like the diocese is top down based on our communication - but is this our reality? How do we value the parishes and the work that is there and communicate what is going on across the diocese to others? We have an amazing church and God to share with our community. People are hungry for the nourishment that can be found in our churches. But if we aren't communicating this, how will people know who we are?

• What is your perception of the role of the laity, clergy and Bishop in facilitating communication within the diocese and how do we change or improve these roles to continue to better our communication?

We need more clarity on the responsibility of communication in our diocese - is there a designated communication person in each parish? Is it clergy or lay? We need more support from the diocese to support communication in our parishes.

• As a member of the diocese, do you feel that you receive adequate and timely information about what is happening, what is proposed, how you can be involved? Do you know how to get questions answered?

Grace Happens is fairly timely - although it has been noted that it is somewhat unpredictable when it comes out. We know that parishes can make submissions to Grace Happens. It was noted that the Diocese does not do a great job at sharing major save the dates. We need months, if not YEARS of notice for major events so that parishes can schedule around them so people can attend.

• Is our communication transparent? Do the people in our diocese and the wider community know who we are through our communications?

The Diocese sees itself as a purveyor of a specific vision that you better get on board with - or else. People feel that the Diocese is irrelevant when they aren't included in the vision. There is some concern that content in the communication doesn't reflect our mission and purpose. There isn't a lot of clarity on what types of stories are shared from the Diocese in Grace Happens and the website and sometimes stories seem to be shared

long after they are relevant. The Abbey was one example of this shared. There were many long articles that didn't say much substantially about The Abbey and then we stopped hearing about it all together. This type of communication does not build trust because people see through it. People aren't really seeing the vision behind "Nurturing joy" - they know that this is a theme but it's unclear how to access this based off our communication.

When communication is lacking or outdated, it does not build trust from people within and outside of the diocese. People who look at an outdated website are not going to offer us the grace of knowing it will be updated soon, but will instead write us off as irrelevant and never give us a chance. While there have been improvements made in our communication over the past few years, we still have a ways to go.

Fellowship -

Our Fellowship Group began through a look back at the fellowship events that were initiated by the diocese since the 2023 convention, noting there were more for clergy than lay people; some were well attended while others were not and concluded that is the normal course of trying new things and should be commended for sure. We then moved on to the definition and expression of purpose for fellowship in the context of our diocese. Contributions included:

- Means of building community among parishes
- Establish external relationships
- Focus on Christian purpose
- Gather ideas for worship and mission
- Keeping us grounded
- Taking care of each other
- Inclusion of all types of parishes, large and small

Obstacles and pitfalls to fellowship included polarization along political, liturgical, parish size/ location as well as the pool of volunteers spread too thin to achieve enthusiastic participation.

What quickly emerged was agreement that fellowship needs to be an intentional priority of the diocese as it:

- is essential to ***growth*** (one of the three overarching goals cited in the Bishop's address to diocesan convention in 2023)
- must be organic, grounded in a grass-roots, 'bottom-up' level of energy to succeed

- must be facilitated through more effective and time-sensitive **communication** (the other overarching goal cited in the Bishop's 2023 address to diocesan convention)

The 'ice breaker' for our MMR session was 'what is your dream vacation' led us each to describe the places we dream of visiting. This led to a moment of revelation to our group— we all love seeing new places and experiencing new things so why should we not start by 'being a tourist in our home town' (diocese)? Ideas began to flow. Why not:

- Encourage/set up a framework for parishioners to visit other parishes (field trips?) from time to time?
- Encourage/set up a framework for our clergy to have a ROTA where they swap pulpits from time to time so parishioners can hear different kinds of sermons/worship in different ways and clergy can benefit from a fresh 'audience' perspective?
- Form a consistent culture of welcome for visitors; how to get them to come back again?
- Build fellowship through smaller (2-3) parish partnerships rather than the top-down, district approach?
- Hold on-going fellowship events (in-person and Zoom) to take advantage of and share the skills and ministries with a wider (diocesan) audience?
- Hold diocesan leadership meetings in-person when practicable and rotate them around the diocese (e.g. return to 2-day convention with shared meals/fellowship)?
- Centering events through the sharing of a meal; central to our worship and fellowship?

We then moved on to specifics regarding how to accomplish these visions:

- Solicit information from interested parishes about special services or events in their communities/parish that may be of interest to others in the diocese (well in advance); we all love and are proud of our parishes; give everyone the opportunity showcase!
- Expand the Curacy program to include a rotation of those in the program, to visit and preach at smaller parishes (since most of our churches are not large and offer bi-vocational clergy opportunities to serve and exposure to small church reality is a gift)
- Create a 'passport' or 'field trip' program to encourage parishioners to visit other parishes and get 'checked off' that they did so (larger Pittsburgh-area churches offer events in hopes that smaller/remote parishioners will/can participate but

larger church members could equally benefit from visiting the ‘family’ churches as well and it can take as long or longer to drive across town than it does to get to a more rural church – and the drive is much more pleasant!)

- Take advantage of the new diocesan website and more real-time communication efforts to create a ‘Forums for Fellowship’ page on the diocesan website that includes:
 - information for parish ‘events’ that may be of interest to all
 - information about virtual events that may be of interest to all member of the diocese (e.g. scheduled Zoom-accessible Bible study groups at times that are convenient when their own parish event is not, or there is no bible study)
 - provide sources for different types of worship and/or spiritual guidance
 - virtual confirmation/baptism classes for parishes that lack a formal process
- Leverage the diaconate (whose mission is to be out in the world to serve and welcome) to venture beyond their assigned parish and facilitate this grass-roots fellowship (offer carpool rides to ‘other parish events’)
- As we accept the reality of shared clergy across parishes, leverage those connections to form parish partnerships beyond that basic need (e.g. in rural areas, rotate the hosting of VBS, Easter and Christmas services among our churches and those in communion with us; and shared missions as well)
- Take full advantage of ecumenical opportunities in our parish communities and create them when there is a void

The Bishop mentioned the lack of ‘energy’ to foster better diocesan fellowship that was grounded in the top-down approach that has been tried before. Our group was unanimous and got excited when we realized it was, like most growing ministries, something that must start locally. People want to connect and share and learn but they are usually energized by personal involvement in something that moves them emotionally and spiritually; when they are recognized as having something valuable to share. First, one-on-one and then it grows from personal, human interaction to the fellowship we all want and need.

We agree with the larger group consensus that leadership is required to take these initiatives, along with those from the growth and communications sub-groups to organize, prioritize and taking them forward toward diocesan-level approval/awareness, planning and implementation.

Growth -

The task set before us was to review three of the Bishop's priorities, Communication, Fellowship, and Growth, as stated in her address at the Diocesan Convention in November of 2023. This working group was asked to evaluate Growth in the dioceses.

First, we defined growth as employed by the Bishop in her Convention Address. In this context, growth means providing opportunities and empowering the clergy and laity in their respective missions, the creation of new episcopal communities, training and supporting existing churches and ministries.

We then set out to answer the following questions and review ministries and programs deemed relevant to the priority of growth.

Have we grown over the past two years? If so, how and where?

Growth is evident in the creation and execution of the curacy program and the lay worship leader program. (The lay worship leader program is in partnership with the Stevenson School for Ministry.) Other growth areas include Exploring Ministry Day, sponsored by the Commission on Ministry, increased conversation and action on social justice issues, and working to find a third way to support many of our parishes without clergy.

What areas do we need to expand?

Communication is critical to growth. It is how we know and understand the needs of our parishes and dioceses, and it is one way we are connected to one another. Continued communication development will help with growth.

We also identified several communities that need spiritual formation and care. These include nursing homes, jails, and college ministry. These readymade communities often need and want the presence of God and the church. How are we currently serving them?

A sign of continued growth would be greater participation in diocesan gatherings (both laity and clergy), organic organizing on the parish level (not just waiting for the diocese to plan and execute), and having positions of leadership filled by people whose gifts align best with its mission and purpose.

What techniques for growth have worked?

Breakfast with the Bishop has created time and space for clergy and the Bishop to gather and build relationships. The curacy program, strengthening lay leadership, and church planting task force have also been successful.

What gaps exist, and what techniques have not worked well?

Gaps include:

- -a lack of support for non-parochial clergy and bi-vocational ministers
- -a lack of training and support for committees and commissions (particularly chairpersons of such groups)
- -timely planning and good communication about events, activities, and opportunities (such as our partnership with Stevenson School of Ministry)
- Communication opportunities such as social media, etc.

Much of our programming lacks transparency. Communication and accountability are key to the flourishing of any program or new initiative. Transparency builds trust and can help prevent alternative narratives from forming.

Current Growth Initiatives -

We also spent time discussing a few of the current growth initiatives and generated the following questions for diocesan leadership to consider:

Campus Ministry: What is the status of our current chaplaincy program? What resources could a campus minister/chaplain offer to our parishes to prepare for students visiting our churches? What partnerships could be built to support campus ministry?

Curacy: This is an exciting new program for the diocese that will help train and retain clergy. Is it sustainable beyond this first cohort? Are there opportunities for our smaller parishes and curates, such as a small parish rotation? How can communication and planning within the program be improved?

New Episcopal Communities: This is an exciting and new phase for our diocese. The formation of a task force to explore new episcopal communities is an excellent next step. There are concerns surrounding the end of The Abbey project. Many find it unclear why it ended and what its purpose was in its initial stages. With the creation of the Brookline Community Revitalization Project, the following questions were raised: What is the process used to discern these ministry projects? What is the process and structure for forming new episcopal communities? Who or what leadership body oversees these projects? How do we learn from mistakes and failures?

Conclusions -

- These three areas - communication, fellowship and growth - are interdependent.

- To have a healthy, growing diocese we need healthy, growing parishes.
- Parishes do not exist in a vacuum but are part of a greater community, the diocese.
- To improve all three areas will require grassroots involvement.
- Talk is great but we need to take action.
- Sustaining momentum is difficult.
- Transparency is essential to establish trust and facilitate relationships within parishes, between parishes and between parishes and the diocese.

Next Steps -

- Form 2 new working groups, one for Communications and one for Fellowship, to follow up on the ideas generated and to support efforts of the diocese and parishes. Leadership of these two working groups has been identified and recruitment to these working groups should begin in early 2025.
- Continue with the Task Force for New Episcopal Communities to facilitate and encourage expansion.
- Continue to evaluate and expand our current areas of Growth, i.e. Campus Ministry, Clergy Formation, Development and Support, and Lay Leadership Development, as well as develop new ideas through the formation of a working group that would support and coordinate all areas of Growth.
- Continue to increase transparency through clear and frequent communication.
- Promote increased lay and clergy participation through clearer descriptions of duties, expectations and benefits of being involved in various governing bodies, working groups, committees, and other opportunities within the diocese.

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Fellowship Group: Ms. Kathy Baird, Facilitator (*St. Peter's, Blairsville*), Mr. Don Block (*St. Stephen's, Wilkinsburg*), Mr. Anthony Crisafio (*St. Andrew's, Highland Park*), The

Rev. Brandon Cooper (*St. Paul's, Kittanning and Christ Church, North Hills*), The Rev. Deacon Lorena Ringle (*Christ Church, North Hills*), Mr. Jim Cassaro (*Calvary, East Liberty*)

Growth Group: The Rev. Bonnie-Marie Yager-Wiggan, Facilitator (*Calvary, East Liberty*), Ms. Pat Dunkis (*St. Paul's, Mt. Lebanon*), Ms. Katie Ong (*St. Francis, Somerset*), The Rev. Dr. Julie Smith (*COM Chair, Supply Priest*), The Rev. Deacon Linda Tardy-Wilson (*Retired*), The Rev. Dr. Luke Zerra (*St. Peter's, Brentwood*)

I would also like to extend our appreciation to the parish of Christ Church, North Hills for hosting this event.

Respectfully submitted,
Florence Atwood, President, Standing Committee
Mutual Ministry Review Coordinator