

Discerning Our Common Call Report from the Charrettes

As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." - Mark 6:34-38a

The work of the Days of Discernment in exploring our diocesan core values led directly into the Charrettes. The Charrettes process uses "brainstorming" to engage in group problem solving. Charrette participants were asked to apply core values arrived at during the Days of Discernment and wrestle with questions of essential functions and funding of diocesan community ministries from the diocesan budget.

Each Charrette began with a period of Dwelling in the Word, reflecting on Mark 6:30-44. Participants reported being particularly struck by Jesus instructing the disciples who had turned to him to solve the problem of hungry people: "You give them something to eat." This was seen as a call to action, and to participate in Christ's love, involving all of us. Bishop Stokes noted that he feels challenged by the Holy Spirit to "Go and see," where God has provided the resources for ministry.

Many were also struck by Jesus' compassion for the crowds, and his attention to their spiritual hunger as well as physical hunger; and by a sense of God's abundance ("all ate and were filled"), which is available no matter how tired or hungry or stumped we may be. Others noted that by feeding the people in this deserted place, Jesus keeps the community together, rather than letting the community scatter in search of their own food.

Next, participants were asked to brainstorm the essential functions of the Bishop and the Bishop's staff. This was to establish an understanding of what is central to our structure and function as a diocese of the Episcopal Church.

The results of this brainstorming exercise confirmed the importance of canonical and sacramental Episcopal roles: visitation, confirmation, ordination, and oversight. Participants also placed a high importance on communication, leadership, pastoral care, and serving as a role model for both clergy and lay members of the diocese. Where participants reported a difference in their understandings of the role of the staff to the role of the bishop, staff were understood to support the bishop in carrying out essential functions, and to have a significant role in communications. Pastoral work and leadership were seen as particular functions of the bishop.

Many other suggestions overlapped with what we heard during the Bishop's forums: that the bishop and staff can play a critical role in connections - among congregations, and with the church beyond our diocese - and in teaching and formation.

A full list of responses to this question from all four charrettes may be found in the Discerning Our Common Call section on the diocesan website.

Participants were then asked to consider what elements of our ministry as a diocese we should stop doing, keep doing, or start doing. This brainstorming exercise evolved during the course of the charrettes. Participants in the first charrette were asked to do open ended brainstorming on these questions. Feedback from that experience led the Steering Committee to modify this exercise. Participants in the rest of the charrettes were given a list of ministries that support our diocesan core values, then asked to say whether they would keep doing or stop doing those ministries. They were also asked what ministries we might start doing to support those core values.

Participants were then asked to prioritize the items they suggested keeping or starting, knowing that our diocesan budget might not stretch to all of the things we wish to keep and start. Although the difference in methodology presents a challenge for analyzing this data, the results across all four charrettes affirm that participants felt our core values were strongly realized through our ministries supporting mission congregations, the vulnerable members of our society who live both within and outside of our diocese, the development of clergy leaders, and justice ministries.

The list of ministries used in the charrettes showed all the activities participants at the Days of Discernment named as supporting the seven core values which emerged in that part of the process. While some were ministries that take place primarily in the congregation and have a minimal impact on the diocesan budget, all are ministries of the diocese, the 144 congregations and their members from Elizabeth to Cape May.

Knowledge and awareness of the many ministries that are supported through the diocesan budget played a large part in how participants ranked the different categories. We heard many comments that participants were unfamiliar with many of the ministries on the lists provided. Generally, more well-known ministries that receive more significant funding tended to be “keep-ers” and achieved a higher priority score, while new or less well-known areas with minimal funding through the budget tended to be “stops” or “keep” but with a low priority score. Comments from participants did indicate a growing awareness of and support for the new initiatives in congregational development and evangelism developed with special initiatives funding over the past three years.

Next, participants were asked to identify ministries, activities, or even values that could be better accomplished using resources other than diocesan budget dollars. While the most frequent suggestions were activities that are already resourced more by congregations than the diocesan budget (e.g. Ashes to Go, Eucharistic ministry, mission trips, and the Acolyte festival), it is notable that many participants suggested that Convocations, Youth & Young Adult Ministry (including Theo’s Café, Choir Camp, and Campus Ministries), and Disaster Recovery could be better resourced outside the diocesan budget.

Participants were also asked to brainstorm resources other than diocesan budget dollars that could support these ministries. An overwhelming majority of participants suggested pursuing

grants: from foundations, governmental organizations, and civic organizations. An increased focus on planned giving (legacies and bequests), general and specific fundraising efforts, and increasing or implementing participant fees for events and programs were other significant suggestions for expanding the financial resources for ministry.

In discussion of several suggestions of increasing participant fees, and moving items like Education For Ministry programs out of the diocesan budget, it was noted that the diocesan budget plays an important role in providing a level playing field for programs and events, allowing congregations with limited funds equal access to these resources.

Another strong theme in expanding our resources for ministry was an increase in volunteerism, including a diocesan talent bank which could help connect ministries and congregations with volunteers skilled in their specific needs, and an increased use of in-diocese talent. A third theme of connecting congregations with one another directly to share resources and ministry, by convocation, region, or interest and need.

One example of effective collaboration and volunteer leadership frequently mentioned by participants in this process is the Way of St. Paul, a congregational program for spiritual growth developed by the Canon for Congregational Development. Participating congregations pay a monthly fee, which ensures the buy-in of participants, with the rest of the cost funded by the diocesan budget, so that the communities most in need of growth will be able to afford the program, not just well-resourced congregations. This ministry develops our in-house talent, with 18 members of the diocese now trained in the skill set to engage struggling congregations in the work of church growth. Also, churches entering into the Way of St Paul are connected to one another by group meetings and coaches to help improve interparish communication and collaboration.

The Steering Committee thanks everyone who participated in one of the Charrettes, and in the Days of Discernment and Forums that led to the Charrettes.