

Report
To the 236th Convention of the Diocese of New Jersey
of the
Task Force on Vulnerable Congregations

In November 2018 the Rev. Canon Brian Jemmott, Canon to the Ordinary, convened a group to consider issues involving vulnerable congregations of the Diocese. As an initial observation, the group noted the large and increasing amount of work required of diocesan staff and members of various committees of the diocese on issues involving parishes and missions that were, in one way or another, vulnerable or at risk. For each congregation the reasons or named problems are different. The issues include questions of finances, demographic changes, management and property issues.

The Task Force met among themselves and then with Bishop Stokes. In the course of these meetings a wide variety of issues and possible responses were identified.

It was the sense of the Task Force, however, that the first task was to identify and agree not on problems or signs of distress but on what it means to be a healthy, thriving congregation within this Diocese. Healthy congregations are not defined just by their age, size or resources. Other measures were needed including successful mission and disciple making. It was the sense of the Task Force that the Convention as a whole should be asked to endorse a description of the “healthy congregation.”

The Task Force framed its work around a number of questions. What does it mean to be healthy and thriving or vulnerable and at risk as a congregations of the diocese? How do we respond when a congregation is threatened? The bullet points below speak to the sorts of questions addressed.

- Thriving congregations come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Can we name what they share or should aspire to share?
- Describe what a healthy congregation engaged in our common Gospel work might look like?
- What are the common standards we should expect as features of congregational health?
- What are the warning signs that suggest the need for prompt assistance?
- What does it mean to participate in the life of the broader church, to be a part of the diocese?
- When a congregation is challenged or becomes vulnerable what tools are needed for the diocese or the congregation itself to be able to respond quickly and effectively?

The Task Force also recognized the need for greater clarity in identifying signs of vulnerability and for procedures which could help address those issues in particular congregations. It was observed that the existing provisions of the Canons for moving from parish to mission status needed to be shortened to reflect the urgency of these matters.

The Task Force spoke among themselves and raised the same issues with several leadership groups around the Diocese seeking their input as well. Based on all of this the Task Force is proposing three documents for Convention to consider.

The first two are amendments to Canon 60 and a new Canon 47. The third is a statement of common expectations to be considered and hopefully adopted by Convention- ***“Walking with Jesus: A statement of our Common Expectations for Mission.”***

In the changes to Canon 60 the object is to shorten response times based on the experience of the Bishop and Diocesan Staff in dealing with parishes which are struggling. In the case of a new Canon 47 the object is to identify and measure expected practices and to establish a format by which the Diocese acting in Convention could periodically articulate its “Common Expectations for Mission.” The document “Walking with Jesus” is being proposed for this purpose. To provide for wider dissemination of this document the proposing resolution will direct that it be published with the Constitution and Canons of the Diocese.

Each of the proposals to change the Canons has been referred to the Standing Committee on Constitution and Canons for review and proposal to the Convention. Copies of these proposals will also appear as a part of that Committee’s report to the Convention. The Statement of Common Expectations for Mission will be proposed as a resolution from this Task Force.

Task Force on Vulnerable Congregations

The Rev. Dr. Brian Jemmott
The Rev. Joanna Hollis
The Rev. Karin Mitchell
The Rev. Dr. John P. Mitchell
The Rev. Mark Van Sant
The Rev. Francisco Pozo
The Rev. Lee Powers.

CANON 47
[New]

Congregational Call, Mission and Standards

SECTION 1. (a) The people and congregations of the Diocese share a common call and mission to proclaim and live out the Gospel. The shape and appearance of that call and mission will vary from congregation to congregation over time and depending on resources and the needs of the people and communities which they serve. That call and mission will always be defined and prompted by the Gospel.

(b) The people of the Diocese acting in Convention may from time to time adopt statements setting forth common expectations for congregational behavior and work in support of the shared call and mission of all congregations. A statement adopted by Convention and specifically describing itself as a standard under this Canon 47 is referred to in these canons as “Common Expectations for Mission.”

(c) It is the mutual responsibility of the Diocese, including its Bishop, staff, the various boards, committees and commissions established from time to time, the Convocations and the several congregations of the Diocese to support each congregation in its efforts to discharge the common call and mission described in this Canon 47 or as described in Common Expectations for Mission.

SECTION 2. (a) In exceptional circumstances a congregation may find itself at risk of being unable to discharge its responsibility to carry out the call and mission which is a part of being a congregation of this Diocese (a “Vulnerable Congregation”). In such cases a degree of episcopal intervention or oversight may be needed as a means of restoring the health of the congregation.

(b) Where one or more of the circumstances described in Section 2 (c) appear to be continuing or a congregation is unable to meet the Common Expectations for Mission, Diocesan Council, or a committee thereof appointed for this purpose, shall make an inquiry into the circumstances at the request of the wardens and a majority of the vestry of the congregation in question or its rector or priest-in-charge, as the case may be, or the Ecclesiastical Authority. Except where more time is reasonably required, Diocesan Council, within 60 days of receiving such a request, shall make a determination that the mission or parish in question is a Vulnerable Congregation or not.

(c) One or more of the following continuing circumstances may be the basis for a determination by Diocesan Council that a mission or parish is a Vulnerable Congregation:

- i. the failure to elect Wardens and a Vestry in the case of a parish or a Council in the case of mission for a period of more than 6 months;
- ii. the failure to call a priest in charge or rector to serve the congregation for more than 2 years;
- iii. the failure to pay the minimum clergy compensation as required by canon (including for this purpose all insurance premiums and pension contributions);
- iv. the failure to maintain the property of the congregation in good repair or in the event of fire or other casualty the failure to take steps to effect such repair, to the extent that congregation is unable to hold public services of worship, except in circumstances where the congregation in consultation with the Ecclesiastical Authority is actively working to relocate to some alternative space for worship and service;
- v. the persistent and significant instability or decline in the financial condition of the congregation, as evidenced by, for example, substantial invasion of the principal portion of

endowment or trust funds, to such a degree that the long-term viability of the congregation as a self-supporting entity is in jeopardy;

- vi. A Vestry's or Council's persistent failure or neglect to carry out its fiduciary responsibilities including conforming to the business methods in church affairs required by the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church or of this Diocese, including requirements relating to proper record keeping, proper maintenance of books of account, annual audit, and the maintenance of adequate insurance;
- vii. The failure to implement in good faith any plan or arrangement agreed to by the congregation under this Canon.
- viii. Apart from the foregoing, a deliberate and continuing breach of any canonical obligation of the congregation.

SECTION 3. If a congregation is determined to be a Vulnerable Congregation in accordance with this Canon, the Ecclesiastical Authority may require the application of one or more of the remedies below:

- (a) The appointment of a Congregational Aid Committee of three or more persons with expertise in the issues leading to the declaration of a Vulnerable Congregation. The Congregational Aid Committee shall propose a plan to restore the congregation to health (a "Plan of Restoration"). A Plan of Restoration shall be accepted or rejected by the elected representatives of the congregation within 30 days, and implemented thereafter in accordance with its terms.
- (b) If the congregation is a Parish, a determination by the Ecclesiastical Authority that the continuation of circumstances specified in Section 2 (c) constitutes a failure to comply in a material way with the requirements set for Parishes by Article VI of the Constitution as contemplated by Canon 60 in which case the Ecclesiastical Authority may follow the procedures set forth in Canon 60.
- (c) Such other measures as the Ecclesiastical Authority shall determine with the advice and consent of Diocesan Council, until the Ecclesiastical Authority declares the end or sufficient amelioration of such conditions, or applies further measures under the Canons.

CANON 60

SECTION 2. (a) If a Parish is unable or anticipates being unable to comply in a material way with the requirements set for Parishes by Article VI of the Constitution for a period of six months, the elected leadership of the Parish shall so inform the Bishop. If it appears that the six-month period has passed and the elected leadership of the Parish has not informed the Bishop, then the Rector of the Parish, the Canon to the Ordinary, if there be one, the Chief Operating Officer of the Diocese, if there be one, the Board of Missions, the Board of Consultation or the Dean of the Convocation of which the Parish is a part, may so inform the Bishop. In either such

event the Bishop shall invite the Rector, Wardens, and Vestrymembers of the Parish to meet with the Bishop and one or more consultants chosen by the elected leadership of the Parish or by the Bishop to discuss and formulate a plan to address the problem. If within 90 days of the Bishop's first being advised of the problem no plan can be agreed by all parties, or, if a plan is agreed but the Parish is unable to achieve complete compliance with such plan within a period of six months after it is adopted, the Bishop may determine that the problem cannot be resolved and that the Parish is no longer viable and should be reclassified as a Mission as governed by Canon 56. The Bishop will inform the Rector, Wardens, and Vestrymembers of the Parish concerned and the Diocesan Council of any such recommendation. The Diocesan Council will make its own determination of whether it does or does not concur with the Bishop's recommendation. The Bishop's recommendation and Diocesan Council's finding shall be reported to Convention for action as provided in Canon 46, Section 2.

(b) If the Rector, Wardens, and Vestrymembers of a Parish wish their Parish to be reclassified for any of the reasons given in Section 2(a) of this Canon, or when, after discussion initiated by the Bishop in accordance with Section 2(a) of this Canon, the Rector, Wardens, and Vestrymembers agree to such reclassification, they may make application to the Bishop in writing to be reclassified. The application shall be signed by a majority of all the current members of the Vestry. If the Bishop consents to the reclassification, the Bishop shall lay the matter before Standing Committee, and if it consents, the Bishop may forthwith reclassify the Parish as a Mission, such reclassification shall be reported to the next annual Convention of the Diocese as provided in Canon 46, Section 2. In such event, no further action by Convention shall be required to effect such reclassification.

(c) If the Vestry of a Parish fails to comply promptly with a judgment issued under canons relating to the Dissolution of the Pastoral Relation, the Bishop shall lay the matter before Standing Committee, with notice and opportunity for such Vestry to appear and be heard. If the Standing Committee consents, the Bishop may forthwith reclassify the Parish as a Mission, and such reclassification shall be reported to the next annual Convention of the Diocese as provided in Canon 46, Section 2. In such event, no further action by Convention shall be required to effect such reclassification.

WALKING WITH JESUS

A STATEMENT OF OUR COMMON EXPECTATIONS FOR MISSION

(adopted by the 236th Convention of the Diocese of New Jersey pursuant to Canon 47)

We the congregations of the Diocese of New Jersey share a common call to form people as disciples of Jesus Christ to carry out Christ's mission of reconciliation. (BCP p. 855) The ways in which we experience and undertake this call and mission vary widely, but there is much that is common. The purpose of this statement is to affirm both our difference and what we share.

- First, we share the Gospel. We are all called to the love of God and each other. We welcome the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. Our communities are defined by that love. We learn to care for one another and for those who surround us. We learn to tear down the walls of separation, to seek and serve the face of Christ in all persons, to respect the dignity of every human being.
- We are responsible for each other. By sharing gifts of time and personal resources we make it possible not just for ourselves to live and thrive in our common call but for other to do the same. To the extent possible those of us who are with greater resources, financial or of people, have a responsibility to share and so to enable all of us to live out the call and mission of love.
- We are a part of a single interdependent community. We are the Diocese of New Jersey. Our participation, our common life together, is not a choice. It is a part of who we are. We are all members of the one Body of Christ. So we expect ourselves and each other to support the common life we share as a diocese, locally, in convocation, in Convention. We do this with our gifts of time, talent and treasure.
- We are very different and celebrate that difference. The richness of difference is a matter of celebration, our heritage, language, ethnicity, location, history. Some of us are small. Some are large. Some are in cities. Some are in the country. We are different. Our celebrations and proclamations are different. The variety of our liturgies reflect the historic diversity of our community. This reflects the diversity of God's reign.
- We share our prayers. We share the Gospel. Above all we share the love of God, the love of Jesus, a love for each other and a yearning to share this all with the world.