



ALWAYS AND EVERYWHERE

It is right and a good and joyful thing always and everywhere to give thanks.

Does 'the Diocese' know or care who we are?

About six months ago, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Allentown advised its parishioners that within two years, due to projected retirements, deaths and fewer ordinations, the diocese would have only 114 priests available for ministry in 151 parishes.



BY BISHOP PAUL V. MARSHALL

It was obvious that more than a few parishes would have to consolidate, merge or close in order to approach the Diocese of Allentown's "desired proportion" of one priest to 2,400 people and to discontinue the practice of twinning, tripling and quadrupling parishes under the charge of one priest. Currently, 34 priests in our five-county sister diocese care for two or more parishes.

As the parish restructuring process began to be discussed on the local level and people wondered whether their church might be closed, a vocal minority began to react and protest. Their reaction centered on blaming diocesan officials and suggesting that "the Diocese" doesn't care for their parish. You may have seen that side of the story in local newspapers, with pictures of picketers demonstrating outside of Bishop Cullen's office.

In my twelve years serving our diocesan community in 14 counties of eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania, two questions have always made me cringe a little: Does "the Diocese" care? Does "the Diocese" know we are here?

Because I have heard those questions again this winter, I want to address them in this column.

When I hear those questions I wonder who "the Diocese" is perceived to be. Who is being perceived as uncaring? Am I? My staff? Council? Convention? Some other entity?

I cannot speak for Council, staff members or anybody else, but I can tell

you what I know about my policies and myself.

When I arrived in the spring of 1996 it was made clear to me that there is a history of parishes north of Route 80 or west of Route 61 feeling in some ways like stepchildren. I have over the years tried to make it clear by where I go and when I go that all are treated equally.

Our training days, the *Share the Bread* festivals, almost all clergy days, and the annual clergy dinner are deliberately held in the northern half of the diocese. Diocesan Council always meets in the north, and the Trustees always meet in the south. Committees tend to meet in the most geographically convenient place.

Most youth events are held in the north. This year we will again rotate Convention regionally. Truly unique events, like *Under One Roof*, occurred in the north. Only Bradford County has a paid representative of the bishop on site to assure that there is a link for what are our most isolated parishes, geographically speaking.

In terms of my own presence and that of Bishop Jack, the canons require that there be a bishop's visit every three years. Visits in this diocese occur much more frequently, and in strict rotation. There are extra appearances at the Cathedral and Pro-Cathedral on holy days, to be sure, but otherwise, we spread ourselves as evenly as we can.

I am very grateful that perceptions of visitations have improved: no longer do people see the schedule and call my office asking me not to come "because we have nobody for confirmation." I am glad to say that people now understand that the bishop comes to visit the parish; while there, he is happy to preside at baptisms, confirmations, and receptions.

Some six or seven years ago, we began prefacing the bishop's visit with a visit from the archdeacon to go over the details of the administration of the parish and to assess the vestry's awareness of the parish's mission and plans to fully implement the parish vision. I am glad to say that these visits have been very productive.

Clergy have the opportunity when they meet in small groups with the bishop each month, to share any concerns or bring any messages. My home phone and email address are public information, and wardens are routinely advised to call me directly with issues or concerns.

Nevertheless, having written that catalog of availabilities, I find myself feeling something else. I remember my own days as a parish priest, how vestries and even clergy can sometimes find it easier to focus on "the Diocese" rather than on themselves. It is easier to imagine neglect by someone else than to accept the fact that this is a hard time for mainline Christianity. In our region, there are towns where churches of every denomination are closing. That is frightening.

I have memories of my days in parishes, of some of my colleagues rather deliberately building antagonism towards "the Diocese" or the national body in order to build their own power or deflect attention from their lack of performance. I cannot say that this is the case any place in our diocese, but I am aware that the temptation exists.

I also know that I am only one person, but the variety of ideas and attitudes projected onto me is stunning, hence the suggestion that follows.

Perhaps when the feeling arises that you have been abandoned or neglected by those responsible to care for the churches, it might be useful to ask if anything else is going on that such a feeling might serve. It has been my experience that where lay people are actively involved in a shared mission, there is no room or time for a sense of abandonment.

I would also ask these two questions. What specifically would make a particular group feel that they were valued, noticed, or paid attention to? Have they asked for that directly? We have had for the last two years elaborate canons that provide for consultation and/or supervision for parishes in difficulty. As of this writing, no parish has requested it.

By the time this reaches you, we will be near the end of the resurrection season of new life. I have a few requests, if we are to live on a higher level.

First of all, if you need something, please ask for it. I am terrible at guessing or reading minds.

If you write or email and don't get a response, please make a phone call. There is no use in sending numerous emails or letters to what could be a dead address; spam filters don't like some senders' addresses, as we all know from daily experience. Our toll-free number is 800-358-5655. My office extension is 222.

Please remember also that in the spiritual and secular sense, we are all on the same side. The spiritual sense of this is clear: we are part of one body in Christ. The secular sense is this: if you are not doing well, "the Diocese" doesn't look good either.

Finally, and above all, please remember that whether they are big or small, those parishes thrive and feel good where there is a common dedication to vision and mission, with everybody pulling an oar.

St. Matthew Society Reception Sunday, May 4

Bishop Paul will greet members of the St. Matthew Society as they gather on St. Matthew Sunday, May 4, for a special reception to honor and celebrate their generosity to the Church. The St. Matthew Society was founded in 2001 throughout the Diocese of Bethlehem to recognize and thank all those who have planned a gift to their individual parishes. This year's celebration event will be held at the Lehigh Country Club from 3:00 to 5:30 p.m., and will feature food, drink and good company. The Bishop sincerely hopes that all current St. Matthew Society members will plan to join him and each other at this special gathering. For information about enrolling in the St. Matthew Society, and/or to learn more about the stewardship of planned giving, please contact Char Horst, Missioner for Development, by email or at 610.683.8625.



From last year's reception.

PHOTO BY SCOTT HORST

THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION

A freely chosen global fellowship of churches in communion with one another and with the See of Canterbury in England, some 76 million people in 38 self-governing churches. www.anglicancommunion.org

Archbishop of Canterbury
The Most Rev. Rowan Williams
Lambeth Palace
London, England SE1 7JU

Episcopal Seat:
Canterbury Cathedral
www.archbishopofcanterbury.org



THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

One of 38 self-governing national churches within the worldwide Anglican Communion, 110 dioceses and jurisdictions in the U.S., Mexico and Central America. Some 100 are within the U.S. www.episcopalchurch.org

Presiding Bishop
The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori
Episcopal Church Center
815 Second Avenue • New York, NY 10017
212-716-6000 • 800-334-7626

Episcopal Seat:
The Washington National Cathedral
www.episcopalchurch.org/pb



THE DIOCESE OF BETHLEHEM

The Episcopal Church in eastern and northeastern PA, 66 congregations in 14 counties: Berks, Bradford, Carbon, Lackawanna, Lehigh, Luzerne, Monroe, Northampton, Pike, Schuylkill, Susquehanna, Wayne and Wyoming. www.diobeth.org

Bishop
The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall bpoffice@diobeth.org
Assistant Bishop
The Rt. Rev. John P. Croneberger
Archdeacon
The Ven. Howard Stringfellow
archdeacon@diobeth.org
333 Wyandotte St. • Bethlehem, 18015
Ph: 610-691-5655 • 800-358-5655



The Diocese of Bethlehem edition of Episcopal Life, the monthly newspaper of the Episcopal Church, USA. Copy deadline is the second Monday of the month. Opinions expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Bishop or the Diocese of Bethlehem. Send articles and letters to the Editor.

Editor: Bill Lewellis blewellis@diobeth.org
Art Director: Jenifer Gamber

Episcopal Life ISSN 1050-0057 USPS#177-940 is published monthly by The Domestic & Foreign Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church, Inc., 815 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Periodical postage paid in NYC and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send changes of address to Episcopal Life, PO Box 2050, Voorhees NJ 08043-8000. Send change of subscription address to Episcopal Life Circulation Department, PO Box 2050, Voorhees NJ 08043-8000, elife@aflwebprinting.com, 800/374-9510.