

**Mutual Ministry Review – Bishop Greg Rickel  
Diocese of Olympia  
September 17, 2009**

**General Impressions and Reflections:**

1. In the course of the several conversations I had throughout the Diocese (Diocesan Staff, CADO, Clergy of Color, Standing Committee, and representatives from the Board of Trustees and Diocesan Council; five conversational arenas in Olympia, Seattle, Longview, Everett, and Port Angeles; several individual letters and emails; and Bishop Rickel) I was warmly welcomed, my enquiries thoughtfully engaged, and the entire process deeply appreciated. People genuinely like getting together to reflect on future challenges facing the Bishop, his office, and the Diocese.
  - a. On several occasions, people commented that the experience of getting together for no other agenda than hearing one another's reflections was welcomed. Even the sparse agenda I provided (challenges for the future and growing edges) was usually surpassed by interactions, questions, and reflections that were generated within the group.
  - b. There is a sense of tentativity throughout the Diocese, wondering what impact the process of open conversation will have on some of the challenges the Diocese is facing.
2. I have been consistently impressed by the superlative leadership in the Diocese throughout all levels and locales. Leadership of parishes, regions, Diocesan staff, and Diocesan Commissions and Boards are, without exception, well informed, committed, and visionary.
  - a. The facile distinctions between layers of leadership (local parish, Regional, Diocesan, stipendary and non-stipendary, ordained and lay, and staff) do not reflect gradations of talent or insight; nor do the distinctions between 'headquarters' and 'hinterland' reflect individual focus or understanding. In fact, such distinctions serve the Diocese badly. The Diocese is distinctly collegial, and all of its diverse voices are informed by profound commitments to the church and its mission.
  - b. As lay/parish programs such as the College for Congregational Development (a very well-received recent initiative) and other lay training initiatives continue to foster congregational leadership, it will become increasingly necessary to warrant the expertise of contributions by those trained leaders. This will have significant implications on the distinctions between the seminary-trained ordained and the praxis-trained laity.
3. There is a universal affirmation throughout the Diocese that Bishop Rickel has done a superlative job in creating a 'new day' of energy and hopefulness for the Diocese, particularly with his declared commitments to strengthen and enrich

- congregations as the central agents for the ministries of the church. He is highly regarded as a person, warmly appreciated as an episcopal presence, and deeply valued as a leader with vision and skill in bringing the Diocese to more effective levels of congregational effectiveness.
- a.. At the same time, the primary concern of the Diocese (especially in light of the retirement of a Suffragan Bishop and other staff reductions) is that the Bishop demonstrate more disciplined patterns of self-care, carefully placing time-off within circumspect boundaries, finding ways to delegate responsibilities to willing volunteers, and discovering ways to reduce personal stress components of his ministries. The most frequent question asked of me has been: “What can we do to help him?” The most frequent concern has been that he not burn out from the sheer pressure of his assumed commitments, particularly since it is obvious to everyone that the Bishop devotes considerable energy to his tasks.
  - b. The challenge that was frequently voiced is how to deal with the dilemma: An initiative that is fueled by the energies and leadership of the Bishop yet directed towards local discipleship and ownership.
4. There is a consistent voice that calls the Bishop to lead the Diocese into systemic change. Although that voice speaks with diverse suggestions and intensities, there is an awareness throughout the system that this particular historic moment in the life of the Diocese is a *kairos* moment – we cannot proceed with ‘business as usual’. Central to this sense of urgency is an awareness that the future of the Diocese is integrally connected to the future of congregations and faith-communities in mission. Some parishes cannot survive, some will need an infusion of new life and hopefulness, some will provide experimental arenas of ministry that others may emulate or imitate, some will share leadership skills and insights to address local challenges. In any case, there appears to be a universal hopefulness that changes will occur as congregations create networks of leadership and resources. There is a consistent hope that the emergent definition of the office of the Bishop will be that he provides the nexus of the networks that allow change to happen.
- At the same time, consistent with any time of change, there is a sense of fear and uncertainty which the ecclesial office of the Bishop will be called upon to address. The Bishop’s challenge will be to provide a sense of stability while also, at the same time, provoking widespread change of attitudes and behaviors.
5. When any group in the Diocese begins to talk about the future, there is an awareness that the crises of our nation’s economic situation will impact us heavily. This will be increasingly true at personal, parish, regional, and Diocesan levels. However, the more those conversations proceed, the more the focus changes from despair to opportunity. Every group’s conversation has concluded with an awareness that the economic crises that have visited us provide an opportunity for examining the focus of the mission of the church, evoking and

creating leadership that is capable of ‘thinking outside the box’, coming to greater clarity on the essential message and purpose of the church.

6. In virtually every arena of the Diocese, the initial response to my conversation-starting question about ‘challenges for the coming year’ was “Communication”. Obviously, there is a consistent need for information, reflection, candid understanding, and conversation. If change is going to take place, and if we are to weather that change with courage and flexibility, communication will be the essential component of a sense of equanimity.
  - a.. Recent use of regular emails communications, both personal and public, by the Bishop has been welcomed. There is a sense, however, that those responses may have been too hasty, that the attention to emails may have compromised self-care, that some email responses may have been delegated to others in the Diocese.
  - c. A distinction might be made between urgent private correspondence (which requires a secure mailbox) and general ‘chatter’ (which might be a more general blog function).
  - d. The advent of electronic communications leads to a host of suggestions:
    - i. Create regional e-mail and blog sites for local congregational information;
    - ii. Use Group sites for some (many?) of the meetings that require Diocesan representation;
    - iii. Establish networks for clergy collegiality – use on-line photo directories of all rostered persons;
    - iv. Create a Diocesan announcement media to which any parish, any Commission, any leader might make regular additions and announcements.
    - v. Develop use of video-conferencing for sharing programmatic expertise.

### **Comments from Regional Listening Points:**

#### **Mood of Diocese:**

Great sense of transparency – open, candid, honest, conversations within Diocese! No sense of hidden agendas or ‘backroom’ deals. Gradually increasing sense of trust and confidence in the Diocese. The Us/Them “mentality which has compromised our energies seems to be diminished”. The Diocese had an image of the leadership of the Diocese as Seattle-based, remote, inaccessible. That has changed through the efforts of Nedi and the Bishop. The mood is that the Bishop honestly invites questions, comments, even criticisms. The ‘rules of respect’ have helped considerably. The College of Congregational Development has been a very helpful model for bringing the Diocese together – but it needs Regional ownership, disbursed programming, scholarship assistance for marginal parishes. Laity in the Regions still have a hard time finding their voice, not because of the Bishop, but because of the domination of clergy voices.

The major factor in changing the mood of the Diocese is a renewed climate of optimism – that even in very difficult situations, there is a positive message and energy. Although there's still a lot of fear and uncertainty throughout our system, there's a sense that the 'new normal' has arrived, that negativity and despair have ended. That negativity largely came from 'the top' – national, diocesan mentalities of closing churches, defeat, reductions, sense of loss and grief. Even when parishes and programs do close in our Diocese (and some should!), we need to acknowledge the good work that has been done, celebrate the past which is ended, and move on with optimism and gratitude for exciting challenges.

### **Essential Functions of Bishop:**

The most important function of the Bishop is that of episcopal presence – a personal contact with diverse groups and locales throughout the Diocese. Furthermore, in that presence, the Bishop 'blesses' those with whom he connects. This function of the Bishop is "the most essential to all of us". The Bishop needs to "sanction and sanctify" all sorts of diverse (even contradictory) strands of the Diocese, creating a 'nimbleness and maneuverability' of mutual regard within the Diocese. "His presence holds the unity while the community dares to act bravely." The Bishop's "presence among us becomes a lens through which we see and value each other". Simply by being among us, the Bishop "blesses and releases" the church.

This sense of the Bishop as the nexus of our diversities comes through his clear message of Jesus as the "revolutionary, challenging, and fulfilling transformative agent" of our lives, our parishes, our world. In his words the Bishop has power - he has the power to inspire the church. That's what we need from him – we need him for "blowing on the God-sparks among us".

This sense of the Bishop "represents a fundamental shift from a hierarchical structure that focuses on him to an episcopal structure that allows us to see each other through". "If this happens as it promises, we will also have a very different vision of the ordained person among us".

### **Relinquishments of Bishop and Diocesan Staff:**

As the conversation about what is essential from the Bishop and his offices have proceeded, I have pressed the question, in light of recent economic constraints, of what the Bishop and his staff can relinquish.

Essential to this concern is an awareness that the Diocese needs to create within itself renewed configurations, networks of local, volunteer, intentional, missional coordination – usually this is described in terms of existing structures of Regions. There is an awareness that some Regions are more functional than others, but there's also an awareness that the agenda of Regions has formerly been the Diocesan agenda of budget and convention planning. (Perhaps the structure of 'Regions' does not honor the suggestions for local, autonomous, networking of congregations, but it is the usual term, with frequent admissions that the structure of Regions is not currently fulfilling these mandates).

If Regions were to be redefined, the big word would be 'ownership'. Regions want to share common local experiences of ministry, they want to create networks

of local involvement in one another's ministries. It was suggested in several places that the Diocese create a Regional 'time and talent survey' to lift up the many skills and passions that exist within a given neighborhood of congregations. Two examples were frequently cited:

The South Sound area (notedly Tacoma) has recently developed very effective ministries to Hispanic and Cambodian communities. These ethnic ministries were developed through collegial networking of local resources.

There have been several instances where local congregations gathered for confirmations and other episcopal visitations. While the Bishop's presence was appreciated, the opportunity to form local collegial networks was 'delightful'.

The very welcomed movement towards congregational development and missional effectiveness would also be greatly enhanced through renewed regional energies. This is the only way we can combat the sense of isolation and 'survival mentality' that inhibits congregations.

Maybe the Bishop or his staff would lead workshops for local venues, but maybe not – perhaps there are local resources and insights that would be more effective. Perhaps there are ecumenical networks (usually local) that would also be effective. In any case, the planning for local training and mission events must be local – only local networks can discern needs, elicit appropriate resources, and assure local ownership of emerging ministries.

The image that is used for speaking of renewed local (regional?) energies is that of 'family' – "We need to create a sense of a family of local passions".

Perhaps the role of the Diocese is the coordination of 'Mission Festivals', 'Stakeholder' workshops, etc .

The localization of planning, training, and implementation of missional goals will be very difficult in some areas of the Diocese. On the one hand, Diocesan headquarters is needed for this to happen – on the other hand, Diocesan leadership could stifle local initiatives. Much of the current work of the Diocesan office inhibits local ownership.

"We have the skills and the resources within our local areas and within our variety of passions and interests to lead our parishes into exciting new directions."

"The current economic situation may be the best thing that ever happened to our Diocese".

### **Comments from Diocesan Groups:**

**Diocesan Staff** – We are facing huge challenges with the budget cuts that have been announced. What are we going to stop doing! We also have a mixed agenda – are we a resource or a leadership? Do we serve congregations or clergy? We've made the Diocese co-dependent on us. Yet there's a great improvement of clergy collegial engagement with the diocese – with that engagement comes greater accountability. As more is demanded/expected of us, we will face more angry voices (mainly email expectations). So self-care and clarity of expectations will be a greater concern. We need to spend more deliberate effort on team building, coordination of newly-assigned jobs,

support and communication during transition. The Diocesan Council needs to assert its responsibility for making priorities.

**Clergy Association of Diocese of Olympia** – The MMR process needs to include the voices of geographically diverse areas of the Diocese. Longview, Olympia, Seattle, Port Angeles, and Everett were suggested. We as a clergy association need some sort of renewed Mission statement. We look to the Bishop to encourage participation of clergy in Diocesan activities. (There is a concern among laity that the voices of clergy drown the contributions of lay leaders. Is this a clergy union?)

**Clergy of Color** – Very concerned regarding recent staff reductions among persons of Color. Also concerned regarding ethnic diversity throughout the leadership structures of the Diocese. Ethnic ministry struggles to assert a more effective voice in Diocese – the majority of the Diocese is curious and supportive, but not conversant with ethnic ministry concerns. There is a need for the Bishop to participate more visibly in ethnic ministries – presence, awareness, advocacy, support. The Diocese and its congregations are missing opportunities to pioneer outreach into the ‘brown church’ of the future. We sense a need for Diocesan restructuring – we don’t sense how we fit into the culture of the Diocese. We feel tangential, patronized, misunderstood. What’s our job, our appropriate focus? The cutting edges of ethnic ministries are not understood in the Diocese or in congregations.

**Standing Committee** - There’s a concern for the impact of cut-backs on the staff. Especially re. Ethnic ministries (Could ethnic ministries attain a Canon status in direct contact with Bishop – a visible symbol of access to the power of Bishop?). The Diocesan emphasis on parishes needs to be articulated more clearly, especially to the clergy and leadership of the Diocese. Greater emphasis needs to be put on regional teams of communication – regional facilitators, convenors. There needs to be some better way for Bishop to hear the candid voices of regional and congregational visioning. Perhaps also a regional contact regarding pastoral care needs for clergy and parishes. It will take awhile for the Diocese to attain stability, consistency, but the presence of the Bishop throughout the Diocese is critical. The Diocesan staff must also travel – be in contact with parishes. Ownership of changes taking place will come through a sense of access to the Bishop and his staff. Concern re. expanding future of Total Common Ministry project – especially in light of Neti’s leadership in that project. How does the TCM coordinate with the Diocesan School of Ministry and Theology and the College of Congregational Development?

**Board of Trustees/Finance** – The Bishop is very knowledgeable re. financial processes, procedures. The largest challenge we face is non-performing loans made to non-functional parishes. We need to work towards greater consistency and transparency in financial reports to Diocese. Perhaps a Mission statement will assist. There seems to be a lot of structural confusion. Certainly the Bishop’s goal of growing more effective congregations is the main direction for our work. It would be helpful if clergy had a more consistent awareness of finances, management, and securities.

**Diocesan Council** - Consists of 25-26 persons (10 Regional representatives, Commission representatives, 8 staff, and the Bishop). There is consistent energy for change, but frustration with the pace of that change. Energy of Bishop gets drained into congregational and clergy crises – congregations and clergy behaving badly. This drains the Bishop and his staff, diverts the resources and energies of the Diocese. The three

goals of the Bishop are excellent, but it's hard to stay focused. Clearly, the work of Regions needs to be re-affirmed. As it is now, we sometimes need to persuade Regions to function in even minimal ways. Congregations are too isolated, clergy are sometimes too territorial, local expectations are too parochial – yet our Regions have untapped skills and resources for future development and change.

### **Trajectories:**

A future Diocesan-wide conversation needs to take place regarding the structure of the Diocese itself. While the suggestion of Diocesan re-structuring has been infrequently mentioned and is probably several years in the future, this observer asks some questions of the system which may become more compelling as proposed changes take place. For instance:

How can Regions be empowered to make decisions about resources and staff for inter-parish ministry ventures? Can Regions be a leading voice in the subsidization of local congregational ventures? If the central Commissions of Racism, Evangelism and Stewardship were decentralized so that those concerns (which ought properly to be ubiquitous) were a part of each Region's core agenda, how then would Commissions and other affinity groups operate?

If the training of laity for greater congregational missional effectiveness is the guiding template for much Diocesan work, what does that suggest about programmatic opportunities such as the School for Ministry and Theology, the TCM programs, College for Congregational Development, and a host of other similar affinity ventures? Should there be greater coordination? Should there be a Diocesan Council focus on lay training as an essential component of its work?

If the Diocese works through a process of metamorphosis (being transformed into something which better suits its missional goals), how may the Diocese claim an image, a metaphor, a symbol, of itself which conveys its renewed sense of identity. Prolonged verbal explications of this dynamic cannot touch the consciousness of the Diocese as well as a single symbolic image. What might that be?

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