

# *The Mission of the Contemporary Parish*

## STUDY GUIDE



Office of Pastoral Planning

Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany

Fall 2005

# **“The Mission of the Contemporary Parish”**

**by Bishop Howard J. Hubbard**

## **Study Guide**

### **Introduction:**

Bishop Hubbard's speech reflected upon "the mission of the parish at the outset of the new millennium." He challenges us to:

- **Make Jesus Christ the focus of parish life**
- **Develop vibrant and dynamic parish communities**
- **Respond to the alienated, the fallen away and the unchurched**
- **Collaborate with neighboring parish communities and see ourselves as part of a wider community beyond our own parish**
- **Engage in constructive ecumenical partnerships and interfaith relationships**
- **Place a greater emphasis on the commitment of our parish to social justice**
- **Renew our zeal , enthusiasm and personal hope for our parish and our church.**

It is our hope that this study guide will enable you to reflect deeply on the challenges before us.

**Purpose of the Study Guide:**

This Study Guide was developed by an Education Sub-Committee of the Diocesan Pastoral Planning Advisory Council.

**The purpose of the Guide is to:**

- Encourage people to think about the mission of the parish on a personal level, and how to nurture and foster that mission, using the mission and ministry of Jesus as a guide.
- Help people see their roles – we are Church and Jesus is our center.
- Distribute the Bishop’s comments to as many people as possible in the Albany Diocese.
- Help people change minds and hearts to embrace and internalize these ideas.
- Provide a tool to use as a catalyst for discussing and creating a preferred future in the parish, deanery, or cluster.

## **Before Using the Study Guide:**

This Study Guide is intended to be used in conjunction with “*The Mission of the Contemporary Parish*” by Bishop Howard Hubbard. All materials are available from the Diocesan Pastoral Planning office.

### **Prior to using this Guide, please:**

- Familiarize yourself with “*The Mission of the Contemporary Parish*” by **reading the article** or **watching the DVD**.
- Use this section on “**Before Using the Study Guide**” to plan how you might use these materials in your parish or group.
- Review Part I through Part VII of the **Study Guide**.
- Each section begins with quotes from the Bishop’s text. The questions encourage deeper reflection, discussion and ideas for actions.

## **What can this Study Guide do for the parish?:**

Remind us that we want to keep Jesus as our center.

Foster interactions among parishioners/group members.

Build relationship and trust.

Help people get to know each other and listen to each other.

Focus on the Bishop's ideas and how they relate to our parish/group.

Begin a process to create a preferred future for our parish/group.

Invest our time and energy to prepare for future challenges.

Create a strong foundation for when we might face difficult decisions.

## **Suggestions for Pastoral Leaders and Pastoral Leadership Teams:**

Invite the laity to participate with you in using the Study Guide.

Consider using with pastoral councils, ministry groups and parish staff.

Feel free to customize the Study Guide Questions.

Plan a series of meetings in which to discuss the material.

Enlist a facilitator to work with you in planning and running each session.

Include prayer as part of every meeting.

## **Suggestions for Facilitators:**

Set the tone; explain what you hope to accomplish with the group.

Offer ideas for appropriate ground rules for working together.

Create an open environment for people to say what's on their minds.

Provide a few minutes for people to reflect/make notes on the questions, after watching the video.

Get people talking; draw them out.

Help everyone listen respectfully to differing opinions and ideas.

Ask to hear from people who have not yet contributed.

Be comfortable and wait with silence after a question is asked.

Trust the group to focus on questions that are most relevant for them.

Stay with the group's discussion rather than pushing forward.

Ask appropriate follow-on questions to encourage in-depth discussion.

Keep discussion on track.

Not every question will be meaningful to everyone.

Not every question needs to be asked.

Encourage people to share responsibility and get involved.

Help the group focus on identifying specific actions they might take.

Debrief each session with pastoral leadership.

Learn from each session to plan for the next.

## *Prayer in Time of Change*

*Beloved Jesus, anoint us to do your will. May the joy of your dwelling in us draw us closer to each other. Expand our vision to recognize your plan; warm our hearts by the flame of your Love; open our lips so that we can speak your Word; extend our arms so that we can embrace each other as your people; speak to us so we can discern the role you have for us, your Body, your Church. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, empowering us to become vital expressions of growth in your changing church. Your Kingdom is now! Help us to discover and live your will.*

*Amen.*

## **PART I – Introduction...What is the Mission of Your Parish?**

*“There will always be need, however, for tangible structures whereby people can experience the loving presence of God and build genuine community by sharing God’s redemptive and liberating love with others. That structure can be the parish community.*

*And the ultimate purpose of the structure we call the parish is to bring people into contact with Jesus Christ and the good news He proclaimed, and to enable people to witness the common faith, love and worship, which the parish members share in communion with Jesus and one another. Jesus, therefore, must be the focus of the parish’s life.”*

*“Today’s parishioners, then, must learn how to enter the mystery of Jesus, seeing how His life, His words, His temptations, His choices, His facing death, and His overcoming death relate to the demands of the day, to the needs of God’s people and to the fears of our contemporary world and society. Our parishes, then, must do a better job in helping people understand that Jesus is present to them here and now, walking the path of discipleship along with them.”*

## **Focus Questions for Part I:**

1. How would you define *the church*?
2. What is the mission of our parish? Do we have a mission statement? How is it used?
3. How do we experience Jesus? How can we help each other experience Him?
4. Identify the ways that Jesus is central to and alive in our parish ministries.
5. What is your hope for the future church?

### **Question to inspire action as an individual or a group:**

What will you personally commit to doing to fulfill your hope; and how will you help others to believe in the church?

## **PART II– Characteristics of Parishes That Are Most Vibrant and Successful**

*“In an abbreviated form, these characteristics are: **first**, good liturgy and preaching. People earnestly desire worship services which help them to pray well and preaching which gives meaning to their faith lives. **Second**, the ability of the parish to help people deal practically with their life concerns, such as alcohol and drug abuse, poor schools, crime and safety issues, unemployment and job stability, and especially their concerns about family and children. **Third**, a feeling of ownership on people’s part, a feeling that they belong, that their concerns are being listened to and that they have had the opportunity to affect parish policy and practice. **Fourth**, an alive quality to the parish; the sense that something is going on, that there is something happening for everyone.”*

### **Focus Questions for Part II:**

1. Are all four of these characteristics present in our parish? Give examples:
2. Which of these characteristics are strongest in our parish? Give examples:
3. Which of these characteristics could we strengthen? How?

4. Name at least two parish ministries that are active and growing.
5. Name a parish ministry that has served its purpose, and needs to be let go of.
6. Name a parish ministry that is needed and does not exist.
7. Who do you consider the lay leaders in your parish? Why?
8. How do we currently identify and train parish lay leaders?
9. How are pastoral council members selected?
10. Are they a prayerful, collaborative visionary team?
11. How are decisions made? Do collaborative teams exist?

**Question to inspire action as an individual or a group:**

What one thing could we do to help our parish become more vibrant in any of the four characteristics?

### **PART III– A Challenge for the Parish: Evangelization**

*“I would say that this issue of responding to the alienated, the fallen away and the unchurched continues to be the No. 1 challenge confronting our church and the parish. The critical question, however, is how do we respond effectively and constructively?”*

*“There are four movements to evangelization as found in the Gospel: koinonia, friendship; diakonia, service; kerygma, proclamation; and eucharistia, thanks and praise.”*

*“Evangelization, then, is first and foremost an exercise in communication and developing relationships. All communication and relationships must begin with listening, otherwise we end up talking to and communicating with ourselves. Therefore, we must recognize that even if we get no farther than the first thrust of this process (friendship and service), we are evangelizing.”*

*“The fact is, we can help people connect or reconnect with the parish and the church only insofar as we have befriended and loved them.”*

*“Evangelization is a matter of being willing to listen, to understand and to walk with (them) in their spiritual quest.”*

### **Focus Questions for Part III:**

1. How does our parish reach out to the alienated, fallen away and unchurched in our community?
2. How might we think about “befriending and loving” the people who participate with us as well as those who do not?
3. Is our parish youth and young adult friendly?  
Do young people serve in ministry and on committees?
4. Can you identify ways our parish community offers mutual, non-judgmental support to each other?
5. Can you remember the last time you personally reached out with love to someone in need?  
To someone you may not particularly like, or whose theology you do not agree with?
6. In what ways are we already an evangelizing community?

### **Question to inspire action as an individual or a group:**

In what ways can we encourage the development of relationships, in order to walk with each other in our spiritual quest?

## **PART IV – Parochialism and the Parish (What does this have to do with me?)**

*“Too many parishes are concerned only with their own immediate local needs and fail to appreciate fully that they are part of a diocesan community and the universal church, and hence are called to be responsive to the needs, concerns and priorities of the wider community beyond the parish’s own mission. The parish, in other words, must pursue its mission as part of the overall mission of the universal and diocesan church, not as a separate, isolated entity.”*

*“Even those parishes which remain vital and vibrant will be able to survive only if they are willing to collaborate with neighboring parish communities in joint articulation of mission, in sharing personnel and resources, and in programming together, for example, in marriage preparation, youth ministry, the operation of food pantries, social service programs, etc.”*

### **Focus Questions for Part IV:**

1. Is your parish part of a deanery? What is the name of it and who is the dean?
2. What parishes are in your cluster? Which parishes make up your deanery?

3. In what ways is your parish already collaborating with other parishes?
  
4. How is the future of your parish linked to these others? Is there a plan for the future of the church in your deanery or cluster, should a change in its structure become a necessity?
  
5. How would any change be negotiated and communicated to parishioners?

**Question to inspire action as an individual or a group:**

What specific things might we do to remind our parish of its relationship to the diocese and universal church?

## **PART V – Ecumenism**

*“An important antidote to what I have just said about parochialism, is ecumenism. Not only is ecumenism necessary for fulfilling the prayer of Jesus on the night of the Last Supper, “May they all be one, Father, as you are in me and I am in you; may they be one in us that the world may truly believe it is you who have sent me” (Jn. 17:21), but very pragmatically we can learn much from our fellow Christians about how best to fulfill the various dimensions of the parish's mission. For example, from the fundamentalist churches we can learn reverence for the sacred Scriptures. From the evangelicals we can learn love for Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior. From the Orthodox churches we can be moved by the splendor of their liturgy, with its focus on the transcendent. From the Mormons we can be inspired by their missionary zeal. From the conservative branch of the so-called mainline churches we can begin to appreciate the value of tradition, and from the liberal branch the importance of social action. And from the small storefront churches we can learn the need for intimacy and the value of belonging.”*

*“We, then, of the faith community in our parishes, our ecumenical partnerships and our interfaith relationships must make dialogue, community building and respect for the dignity of each person priorities in our personal, social and ecclesial lives. Especially we must demonstrate that we can*

*keep our deepest convictions and still maintain our civil courtesy; that we can test others' arguments but not question their motives and that we can form communities where conflicts are not avoided but resolved peacefully.”*

**Focus Questions for Part V:**

1. How do we currently share space, resources, or programs with local churches?
2. How have we partnered ecumenically in addressing the social issues of our day, like: war, terrorism, economic disparity, the breakdown of the family, gender identity, environmental issues...?
3. What does “moral values” mean to you?
4. In what specific ways, have we in our parish stood up for what we believe?
5. How might an interfaith dialogue on polarizing issues be possible in our parish?

**Question to inspire action as an individual or a group:**

What will I do next? What next step has been suggested by our discussion?

## **PART VI – Social Justice**

*“Finally, if I were to revise my 1998 reflection on the mission of the parish I would put much greater emphasis on the commitment of the parish to social justice.”*

*“How can people believe we are a community of disciples if we do not love one another and seek ways to become a voice for the poor and powerless? Pope John Paul II has made this a consistent theme of his papacy. As recently as last month\* he noted that despite the fear they may not be up to the task, or that our principles of social justice are "too great and noble" to be actualized in this world, "lay Christians are to be the living instruments who witness the values of the church's social justice teaching in our world.”*

*“We then must make Catholic social teaching part of the credenda (things to be believed) which then become for the believer a basis for the agenda (things to be done) which the believer must implement.”*

*“It is imperative that our parishioners become aware of the issues confronting our society, be educated on these issues and be willing to let our elected officials know of their support of or opposition to particular public-policy concerns. And the more credible our witness becomes in this regard, I believe the more attractive our parish ministry of word and sacrament will be.”*

## **Focus Questions for Part VI:**

1. Does our parish have a social justice committee?
2. How have our homilies addressed social justice issues?
3. How does our parish demonstrate familiarity with the Catholic Social Teachings?
4. When is the last time you or your family did community service?
5. How do we ensure parishioners get current in formation on public policy?
6. Does our parish participate in lobby day in March?

### **Question to inspire action as an individual or a group:**

What do we need to do now? How will I be involved personally?

## **PART VII – In Conclusion**

*“In conclusion, let me suggest that addressing the needs I have mentioned and exploring the solutions I have suggested will demand renewed determination, zeal and enthusiasm on the part of all. For these are challenges that do not readily admit of facile solutions, and humanly speaking we might want to cling to the status quo or to retreat to the serenity of a previous age where life and ministry in our church seemed more stable, more secure, more clear-cut, to a time when there seemed to be a consensus in the church, wherein roles were clearly defined - where answers appeared black and white, and where the ideological litmus tests, mean-spiritedness and lack of civility that polarize people and poison the debate in our contemporary climate did not exist”*

*“Most of all, then, we need to be people of hope. For living and dynamic hope is the quintessence of the Gospel message.”*

*“Granted this is a tall order and that the battle against cynicism, discouragement, disillusionment, apathy and indifference is a constant one, but the hopeful mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus requires nothing less on our part.”*

## **Focus Questions for Part VII**

1. Describe the ways that the people of our parish look like “resurrected people.”
2. How can we revitalize the mission of our church?
3. What would it take for us to be a loving community of faith and service?
4. How can we help families to form households of faith, and to identify with the church as their primary community?
5. How can we help others to welcome and support change?
6. How can we create a community of disciples equipped to enter into the church of the future, with open arms?

### **Question to inspire action as an individual or a group:**

What specific steps must we take as a parish to help us move closer to our preferred future? In what way(s) will I commit myself to being involved?

# Notes

**Office of Pastoral Planning  
Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany  
Fall 2005**