

Final Report on Pastoral Visits with Bishop Neary

In summer 2023, the initial planning for these pastoral visits began as a partnership between Bridge Builders for a Thriving Mission (BBTM) at the Saint John's School of Theology and the Diocese of Saint Cloud. A committee was formed to lead the design and implementation. It included Barbara Sutton, Kristi Bivens, Janet Dusek, Brenda Kresky, Barb Simon-Johnson, Joe Towalski, and Bailey Ziegler.

The Pastoral Visits with Bishop Neary (PVBN) had three goals

- To build bridges for a thriving mission across parishes in an Area Catholic Community (ACC);
- To develop ACCs as learning communities through listening and dialogue;
- To offer radical hospitality that would nurture relationships between Bishop Neary, the diocesan staff, and ACC pastoral leadership.

Gratitude

The ACC Care Teams were instrumental in preparing their ACCs for the pastoral visits. Barbara Sutton and Brenda Kresky provided a workshop and resources to equip these ACC Care Team members for two preparatory consultations to each ACC. The first consultation included a shared meal with the pastor and a small group, during which they introduced the concept of a pastoral visit, provided a timeline, and answered questions. They also gave encouragement during the planning stage and on the day of their presentation. The second consultation, equally important, was an opportunity to evaluate and debrief each PVBN session they attended. The Diocese of St. Cloud thanks the following ACC Care Team members: Kristi Anderson, Mayuli Bales, Kristi Bivens, Elizabeth Neville-Brown, Fr. Matthew Crane, Elizabeth Kampa, Janet Dusek, Patrick Flynn, Laura Gorder, Anna Kampa, Maria Heymans-Becker, Brenda Kresky, Fr. Doug Liebsch, Kateri Mancini, Christine Pinto, Brittany Prigge, Kent Schmitt, Barb Simon-Johnson, Joe Spaniol, Kate Steinbach, Jill Svihel, Dianne Towalski, Joe Towalski, Carolina Walz, S. Jeanne Wiest, OP, and Bailey Ziegler.

The Planning Office provided substantial support throughout this entire process thanks to Brenda Kresky and Maria Koopmeiners. S. Jeanne Wiest, OP, attended to the liturgical needs for the Celebration of the Eucharist. Maria Heymans-Becker and Bailey Ziegler dedicated time to organizing nametags, registration, and table assignments.

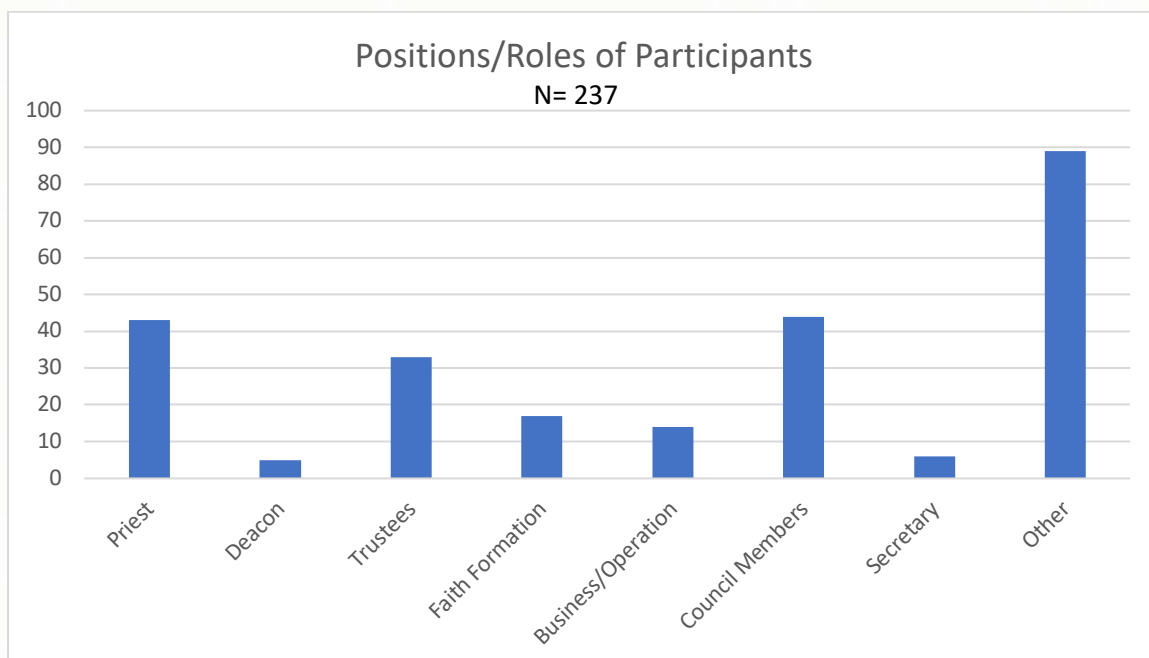
Special thanks are also due to Danny Primus for providing room arrangements and handling last-minute details and to Sandy Faust for preparing our morning hospitality and lunches. In addition, we appreciate Mo Putnam for accompanying us with music and securing our choir for our liturgies; the musicians helped us lift our voices to God.



Participants

Overall, 237 people participated in these pastoral visits from 29 ACCs. Pastors, parochial vicars, and deacons made up 20 percent of attendees. The remaining were lay ecclesial ministers, trustees, lay volunteers, or parishioners. They were predominantly an English-speaking group, with approximately 8 bilingual participants. An equal number of men and women were represented.

The following chart provides a breakdown of different roles represented. While some roles were consistent, there were also parishioners, volunteers, and other roles (paid and unpaid) that are not included under these most frequent titles.



Mutual Appreciation

The planning team does not take for granted the amount of effort and sacrifice people made to prepare their presentations, take off from work (if necessary), and drive to Saint Cloud. Those who completed evaluations of the visits described them as worthwhile, saying that they felt engaged and that it was important for them to be here and support the ACC and Bishop Neary. On a scale of 0 to 100, people gave the day an 84. They valued the opportunity to put names to faces of people within and across their ACCs. For many this gathering provided an opportunity for people to meet. People expressed appreciation for the good presentation and generally appreciated each other's work. While each ACC is different, many were surprised that they share common struggles, benefits, and progress. People described the way they put their presentations together.



Some were done by the pastor. For most, however, the ACC team worked together to prepare their presentation and noted they became a learning community, learning new things about each other, the parishes, and the ACC. On a scale of 0 to 100, people expressed an average of 62 for most definitely learning new information and gaining a deeper understanding of ACC relationships.

Over and over people expressed overwhelming support for Bishop Neary's ministry and his priorities. They were deeply satisfied by his morning talk and the opportunity to celebrate the Eucharist with him. People lamented that Bishop Neary could not be at every discussion table. He did, however, do his best to greet everyone each time in a special way. In his morning talk and homily, people felt he was talking directly to them. One parishioner offered this comment: "The Bishop offered a fresh, frank assessment of the problem with a large number of parishes and the need to add new structures."

Overall, 87 percent of the participants felt the pastoral visits strengthened their relationship with other diocesan pastoral leaders. These days provided an opportunity for diocesan leaders to listen to and connect with ACCs. They identified strengths, areas of collaboration, and places they might offer their expertise. Participants weren't short on ideas to continue strengthening the relationships. They offered these suggestions:

- + Overnight retreat with parish leaders and diocesan staff
- + Develop a quarterly video about what is happening in the diocese, upcoming events, and available resources for ACC councils to watch and discuss at their meetings
- + Provide more opportunities like the PVBN to help people feel they are not on their own
- + Host a workshop to guide staff and parishioners through the diocesan website
- + Diocesan leadership make pastoral visits to the ACCs to learn from each other, share resources, ask questions, and exchange new ideas
- + Create a video of the diocesan staff sharing who they are and the services offered by their office
- + Routine visits to deanery meetings are appreciated. One person summed it up saying, "Maybe rather than the diocese gathering everyone in St. Cloud, we could have the leadership team come out to the ACCs and visit with them one-on-one to really engage with them to see what is working and what isn't. Sometimes a different setting where members are more comfortable would garner more in-depth discussions. We would be able to show them rather than just speak about it."



Bishop Neary's Priorities (2023–2024)

Bishop Neary articulated his six priorities that have shaped his initial episcopacy. Participants were asked to weigh in on their support for the priorities, ranging from 0 (No, I am still trying to understand his priorities) to 100 (Yes, I understand his priorities for the Diocese of Saint Cloud). Here are the average results:

Priority 1: The well-being, support, and enrichment of our pastoral team.	Average: 84
Priority 2: Care for the priests of the diocese.	Average: 93
Priority 3: Seeing synodality as a model for the Church and the Diocese of Saint Cloud.	Average: 70
Priority 4: The Eucharistic Revival	Average: 87
Priority 5: The Latino presences in the Diocese of Saint Cloud	Average: 76
Priority 6: Strategic planning for the next phase for our ACCs	Average: 79

Fortitude

We started this process by following a few flashes of light and inspiration while building on our ministerial experience here in Central Minnesota. Our three goals felt like a promise of something more. We held ourselves open to them to see where they would lead, like a constellation of new perspectives to wonder about and consider. Now we're pulling these goals back together to look at where we have been and what we're carrying forward.

We are building bridges for a thriving mission in layers, equipping ourselves and others as we encourage co-responsibility and aim to build relationships between different parishes in an ACC, with Bishop Neary, and with the diocesan leadership. We set it up to function as a learning community, to exchange knowledge and practices and to understand priorities. According to some, "There was nothing new." For many, however, the process generated new ideas and disrupted some long-engrained practices. We tried to create a safe place for people to gather in an environment of trust. Our conversations were fluid and often synodal. Forging these bridges provided space for transverse solutions to emerge for the Church's challenges.

The words we choose are important. For example, "co-responsibility" is not a word regularly used by parishioners and parish leadership. Co-responsibility for mission is a concept in the Catholic Church that refers to the idea that all baptized people, clergy and laity, are responsible for carrying out the Church's mission. Rooted in baptism, this concept emphasizes the unity of the Church and the importance of teamwork.



The Church is in transition. Fortitude is not a spontaneous feat. Rather, it is an inching journey, moving step by step. And what requires strength may surprise us. Waiting takes strength. Walking away takes strength. Even joy takes strength. But as we build resilience for thriving, old leaves fall, and the extraneous drops. Hopefully, we embrace the next steps forward.

Our participants offered comments to consider as we move into the upcoming diocesan planning process. One writes, “I could be wrong, but I keep hearing from the staff that the ACC program is not about closing parishes, but is the staff being truly honest to God’s people?” Others echoed this same sentiment. Another writes, clergy and laity expressed that having two pastors in an ACC is not working. It is sometimes hard to reach consensus. Several participants described a waning leadership in an ACC as clergy and lay ecclesial ministers find themselves with more demands than time and sometimes experiencing burnout as they navigate these new structures because there are no simple strategies or solutions to network parishes, employees, parishioners, programs, finances, and liturgies into one ACC.

Paying attention to the intersections of conversations and data, common pastoral concerns emerged—identity, communication, stewardship, hospitality, and igniting volunteers for discipleship. Our young people might even be surprised by the number of people who miss them in church and want to provide them with spirited evangelization and catechesis.

We understand Bishop Neary’s care and concern for his priests, as well as his diocesan leadership team. These Pastoral Visits with Bishop Neary have animated people because they recognize that God is calling them to play their part in building up the local Church. And their motivation is firmly grounded in their personal relationship with Jesus Christ. One participant wrote, “There is an energy in the diocese that resonates with people in the pews.” It is evident that these leaders who participated in the pastoral visits are the basis of their parish councils, apostolic groups, and most spin-off initiatives. They are different from our clergy and professional lay ecclesial ministers. They have strong faith and humble dispositions that, while being respectful of everyone, recognize at the grassroots and day-to-day activities opportunities to forge new partnerships and to build bridges for a thriving mission. They are people who turn to Emmaus Institute and other diocesan offices for lifelong formation and pastoral planning skills. They have turned to the Bridge Builders for a Thriving Mission initiative for in-depth discernment of their gifts and charisms, for CliftonStrengths, for formation as lay pastoral caregivers, for radical hospitality, for intercultural learning, and for contemplative prayer practices. They provide a stability characterized by mutual respect and good will. In a way, they keep the parish/ACC moving forward by attending to the critical pastoral concerns of our day: belonging, good relations, the well-being of all. They hold the possibility of reorienting our parishes into intentional Christian communities.



There are 55 parish priest serving 29 ACCs. Sunday celebration of the Eucharist is essential in our ACCs. Tending to the sacramental needs is a priority. Nevertheless, Christ's vision of Christian community can never be reduced to a single weekly meeting for worship. Such a model would disconnect the community from entire weeks full of joys and hopes, grief and anguish that belong to our families, neighbors, and others in our midst.

While reorienting the legacy of the ACC structures, these times also call for parish renewal and gatherings. If we are not thriving, we are collapsing.

Three considerations are important for parish renewal:

- 1) ongoing nurturing of a connection of all parishioners,
- 2) effective leadership that embraces a commitment to nurturing everyone's capacity to contribute,
- 3) parishioners committed to their own and others' transformation in Christ through a humble docility to the Holy Spirit—seeking a way to dispel the divergent visions and tensions that hold back much-needed renewal.

I recommend preparing these people and others in their parishes to be formed and prepared to be a hive of busy bees, to renew the life of the parish. After all, as Saint John Chrysostom preached, "The bee is more honored than other animals not because she labors, but because she labors for others." This hive would:

- 1) understand parish, ACC, diocesan, and universal Church identity;
- 2) develop a stewardship program that includes time, talent, and treasure;
- 3) become bridge builders committed to radical hospitality and belonging;
- 4) create a grassroots communication model for disseminating information;
- 5) prepare the laity to read their local community with the eyes of Christ and, when supported, find ways of responding to felt needs.

Renewing parish life does not detract from the structure of the ACC or its staffing patterns. It invites co-responsibility at every level of the ACC structure and within the life of each parish. It holds in place the ACC Council while animating the gifts of the people and the life of the community for a thriving mission. This also furthers the concept of a Parish Life Committee.

Renewal will take the expertise of diocesan leaders that provide ministerial consultation, formation, and strategic planning. This leadership development could take place in ACCs, deaneries, Emmaus Institute or Saint John's School of Theology. It is a different role than the Care Teams have offered. In the next phase of Bridge Builders for a Thriving Mission, resources may be allocated to this.

Bishop Neary, these Pastoral Visits have been a capstone of the Bridge Builders for a Thriving Mission initiative during the past five years. There is a good measure of



success in meeting the three goals for these pastoral visits. With the ongoing nature of any organization, there is always next steps towards a thriving mission. It is true for the Diocese of Saint Cloud and the School of Theology. We look forward to accompanying the Church in Central Minnesota when the need arises. For your leadership, I am grateful.

Barbara A. Sutton

Barbara Sutton,
Director, Bridge Builders for a Thriving Mission
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