

St. Patrick Parish, A Journey of Healing

This report is provided by the Elders of St. Patrick Parish to our fellow parishioners and to our Bishop in Superior. This report will briefly review the actions of St. Patrick Parish over the last year in response to the murders of Dan O'Connell and James Ellison and the suicide of Fr. Ryan Erickson. It will also describe the journey of discovery and healing regarding problems in our parish. Last, but not least, we want the whole world to know how much this parish family appreciates the support and leadership shown by our Pastor, Father John Parr, who clearly came to us by the working of the Holy Spirit to guide us in these difficult times.

The Last Twelve Months

It was a year ago that we were reeling from the headlines in our local and national newspapers and asking ourselves "How could this have happened at our church?" In response to the judge's ruling that Fr. Ryan Erickson was responsible for the murders, our Pastor immediately issued a news release statement expressing acceptance of the ruling, provided condolences to the families involved and inviting those who have been hurt by Fr. Erickson to come forward and receive care. Fr. John then initiated a process for healing, which involved listening to 'all voices'.

Over the course of last winter and spring, many parishioners participated in parish listening sessions. During these sessions, we explored difficult issues that had existed for many years and had previously gone unaddressed (e.g., divisions, 'camps', incivility, gossiping, lack of follow through on complaints). As a family, we named our problems and then looked for ways to address them in a spirit of Christian charity and forgiveness. We prayed together and humbly asked God to "comfort us in our afflictions" and to "... accompany Your people of St. Patrick Parish."

It became evident during the listening sessions, that healing and change were needed on two levels: one within the parish, the second within the diocese. The remainder of this letter will discuss our efforts and progress to date in both areas.

Parish Efforts to Engage the Diocese

Based on input received from the parish, the Elders identified key diocesan programs and processes that needed change (e.g., seminarian qualifications, complaint handling at the diocesan level). A process of dialogue was established with our Bishop and his office regarding concrete changes.

Bishop Fliss came among us on January 15, 2006 and apologized. He answered numerous questions from the audience, and later completed answering over 310 questions in writing. It was an important first step in listening and healing.

He also delivered and personally committed to Four Commitments regarding the areas identified by St. Patrick Parish:

1. Priestly formation and connections to seminarians
2. Assignment, evaluation and mentoring of diocesan priests
3. Improved communications with parishioners, pastors and diocesan school officials

4. Institution of an Ad Hoc board, with laity input, to assist the Bishop with dealing with a wide range of risk issues, going beyond child abuse and the directives of the USCCB Charter for the Protection of Children

The Four Commitments represented the items the Bishop promised he would pursue at the diocesan level. Beginning in January, we awaited progress reports on them. In the following months, we turned attention to the needs and issues within our own parish (discussed under Parish Healing section below).

Since January, the Elders have continued to press Bishop Fliss for details, public dissemination and tangible evidence regarding progress on the Four Commitments. Having received no progress reports from the diocese, on April 5, 2006 we wrote him asking for updates and to recommend diocesan-wide publication of the Four Commitments. We also provided him explicit feedback on the Four Commitments and gave him concrete suggestions for their implementation. We communicated to him our sincere desire to cooperate in all the identified areas, especially in the formation of the Ad Hoc review board. We continue to see this board as a mechanism to give the Bishop direct input on a host of issues that could benefit parish life across the diocese (e.g., proactive risk assessment).

Under the continuing auspices of Fr. John, an Elders sub-group met with Bishop Fliss in Hudson on May 22 to reinforce our desire to see tangible progress in these four areas and to reiterate our willingness to partner with him for the good of the greater Diocese. On September 6th in Superior, the Elders sub-group met again with the Bishop to restate these messages. In that meeting, we received promises that the Bishop and his staff would apply new energy to the agreed-upon areas and that the Bishop would promptly publish progress reports to the entire diocese. We were very heartened by these developments. On September 13, 2006 Bishop Fliss wrote thanking Fr. John and the Elders for our cooperation and reiterating his commitments. He closed his letter with "please accept my sincere gratitude for your patience with me and the encouragement you have been providing. I appreciate your firm but gentle insistence that we all stay the course with our commitments and future plans. The Lord, we know, is among us and does provide what most we need at every given moment." We were encouraged by our Bishop's words and pledged to work with him on making the commitments a reality.

Earlier in the year, the Elders had met with the O'Connell and Ellison families to express our on-going support for them and to discuss their Five Point Program for reforms within the church. In the summer of 2006, the O'Connell family initiated a lawsuit against all dioceses in the United States to press aspects of their Five Point Program. This lawsuit does not seek any monetary compensation. Many at St. Patrick Parish continue to stand in solidarity with the O'Connells in regards to their overall goal of reform and prevention of future clergy abuse.

Regrettably, on October 15th, 2006, the Bishop wrote us again. He stated, as the result of litigation against the diocese, "Although we appreciate the counsel and assistance ... the (E)lders have offered the diocese, upon our lawyer's direction, we must now discontinue consultation with ... the (E)lders because our efforts to heal the hurts in St. Patrick Parish intrinsically involve the [litigation] claims of the O'Connells and Ellisons. We must now seek counsel from our lawyers." We have spoken to the Bishop since receiving that letter and he has told us that he still intends to follow through on his promises of January 15. Although it appears we can no longer formally consult to the Bishop given his legal position, the Elders will continue to push for implementation of the Four Commitments and will always be open to serving as a resource to the Diocese of Superior.

Parish Efforts towards Healing within the St. Patrick Community

Never forgetting the grief of all families and friends involved in the tragedies, the parish continued to work through our collective hurt and exhibit more charitable ways to worship and come together as a community. We learned from the Gospel witness of Fr. John that our faith calls us all to be a forgiving people. Individuals apologized to individuals, and many sought to rectify years of discord with their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Beginning with the new year, we had a goal of developing a vision for our parish community. More listening sessions were held. The common themes we heard involved welcoming, better communications, respectful dialog and enhanced opportunities for faith formation. This process culminated in the creation and acceptance of Vision 2007.

Vision 2007 is the blueprint for the parish to create a vibrant Catholic community. It describes how we are going to move forward as a parish, and has seven mutually supporting areas of focus, grounded in scriptural imperatives. They are as follows:

1. Clear, functional, responsive systems and structures for leadership in action
2. Commitment to unity with differences
3. Holding ourselves and our leaders accountable
4. A vibrant and welcoming faith community
5. A culture and interaction of respect and civility
6. All parishioners actively involved in ministry and service
7. A culture of lifelong Catholic formation grounded in Church teaching

Under the direction of our Pastor and the Pastoral Council, Vision 2007 is now being implemented. We are already seeing the fruits of these labors. Examples follow:

- To improve welcoming efforts, Sister Bernadette now has a group of eight spirited people who visit new parishioners in their homes and extend personal invitations to greater involvement.
- To improve communication, Fr. John invites and respects honest dialogue with him and amongst ourselves. In addition, in efforts to bring about transparency and accountability, important documents are now posted in a timely fashion on our recently overhauled and easily accessible website : *stpatrickofhudson.org*.
- To make parish finances and operations more transparent, the parish Finance Committee has published an annual report and hosted an informational session sharing the realities and accountabilities of running our parish. All parishioners have been invited to give input in this important area.
- To extend greater opportunities for adult education, the Faith Enrichment Committee has been sponsoring well-attended classes on scripture study, our catechism, and faith updates.
- In addition, the Family Life, Social Concerns, Discipleship, Liturgy, School/Education and Religious Education Program Committees have been hard at work to make the recommendations of Vision 2007 a reality.

Moving Forward

A year ago, we met in anger, disappointment, and sadness. For those who have worked with us on healing, those feelings have given way during the journey of this last year to a renewed realization that we belong to a church founded by Jesus Christ, not by fallible humans. We have not forgotten the deaths of our three friends that caused us to come together in crisis. However, their passing made us focus on what we can do

together to make our church a vital, welcoming place where we can all find the presence of Jesus in our midst. The people of St. Patrick Parish intend to continue this journey as disciples of Jesus Christ. We once again invite our Bishop to journey with us.

Without any reservations, we wish to express our love and appreciation for our Pastor, Fr. John Parr, who has been the inspiration and shining light to all of us on this journey.

Note: The documents referenced in this report and important other documents chronicling the journey of healing at St. Patrick Parish are available on the parish web site at: stpatrickofhudson.org

October 29, 2006