

The Bishop of Chicago's Expectations

There has been concern expressed by some parishioners about the upcoming parish transition, not knowing what Bishop Lee expects and will find acceptable in order to appoint a new Rector of a parish (whose internal life for the most part is independent) and what he will permit in a Priest of a canonically "distressed parish" or mission (whose internal life he controls completely) in this time of systemic change in our society and its values and thus in the core life of the institutional church everywhere.

Yesterday afternoon I had a conversation with Nancy Meyer, a former parishioner of St Paul's who is at Chicago's St Peter's, Belmont Avenue, which is now a canonically "distressed parish" facing either effecting radical fundamental change or closure by the diocese. Nancy told me that Bishop Lee told St Peter's parishioners that he had three criteria to be met in order for a congregation in this diocese to remain open:

- 1) **It must be financially self-supporting.** There will be no financial support from the diocese for any congregation, only congregational development expertise resources. If there is no longer sufficient pledged income, the congregation must find other ways of supporting itself by fundamental down-sizing of buildings and staff (including having only part time clergy) and/or finding ways of partnering with other congregations or not-for-profit organizations.
- 2) It must convincingly answer the question "**Why should there be an Episcopal church in this place?**".
- 3) In addition to any other programs, **it must have a mission that is uniquely Episcopalian.** He went on to say that "liturgy" is not an acceptable answer, nor is "affirming" which every other church in that North Side community is also; it must be something that only the Episcopal Church is able to do.

To the degree that this is accurate, I not only completely agree with these requirements, I very enthusiastically support them! These are precisely the three things that St Paul's has been working to develop for the past 36 years:

- 1) St Paul's now has, or has "in the pipeline," designated safety-net endowments for the support of the Office of Rector, Christian Education, and building maintenance – in addition to other programs – which will provide basic funds for these fundamental irreducible expenses in perpetuity. They will, however, not in any way put the parish "on Easy Street" or reduce the necessity of responsible parishioner stewardship or, as Dr Myrtle Mason put it, "create parishioner complacency."
- 2) While St Paul's has two very significant ministries in the Riverside and surrounding suburban communities – PeopleCare, Inc. (which provides support services for the involuntarily homebound) and Building Blocks Preschool – perhaps more importantly its location in Riverside is providentially central to the metropolitan area because we are a "destination congregation" with parishioners coming *every Sunday* from Chicago's Jefferson Park, Printers' Row, Jackson Park Highlands (south of U of C), and Beverly and suburban Prospect Heights, Barrington, Naperville, Bolingbrook, Darien, Downers Grove, and Oak Brook, as well as neighboring Oak Park, LaGrange, North Riverside, Brookfield, and Westchester.

3) The mission of St Paul's is to develop and support Benedictine spirituality, life, and culture, and make available a Benedictine community here for those parishioners called to that vocation, all of which is uniquely Episcopalian because – unlike other Catholic bodies which include in their structure, among other traditions, Benedictinism – the basic “DNA” of Anglicanism itself as a whole is Benedictine. I am this week, as I approach retirement, re-writing my will. Although I am including a bequest to the Building Fund Endowment – something I strongly encourage all of us to consider – the bulk of my remaining estate will go to fund a designated endowment to develop and support Benedictine Catholic spirituality and culture for all who would like to have the opportunity to grow in that tradition. (Carlmac Falk has said that his “wild dream” is to have St Paul's become a West Suburban Center of Benedictinism.) Farther afield, St Paul's also has a distinctly Episcopal mission, a designated endowment, the principal of which will eventually be seven-figures in size, to provide aid to the poorest-of-the-poor through Anglican Church agencies, with first priority to go to the Third World.

Another way of putting this, as I see it, is that Bishop Lee's three criteria for parish life – which are completely non-ideological, non-partisan, and totally removed from the current “culture war” – lie at the heart of the life of St Paul's.