

The Three Primary Tasks of a Diocese – with an assessment worksheet

Primary Task

This is a term from the field of organization development – “primary task.” The primary task is the most important and essential process an organization uses in fulfilling its mission. For example, for years Loren Mead and others have been proposing that the primary task of a diocese is congregational development. I think that’s correct. I think the diocese also has at least two important secondary tasks: 1) engaging the society and culture of the geographic region that makes up the diocese, including issues of justice, compassion and evangelization that are regional in nature; and 2) participation in the wider church by its connection with other dioceses, the national church, the Anglican Communion and ecumenical bodies.

There are also all sorts of odds and ends a bishop may need to deal with but these three things are the core. And the renewal and revitalization of parish churches is the primary task. If a bishop does the other two things and fails at this—that bishop has failed.

A diocese may do many worthwhile things, but it has failed if it doesn’t nurture the health and faithfulness of its parishes.

Being clear about the primary task of any organization is essential if we are to focus resources in the service of mission. Some people in the business community talk about “stacking resources toward success.” That has to do with placing your human, material and financial resources in service of the primary things you are trying to accomplish. Primary task clarity allows us to stack our resources.

What is the primary thing that a parish church does toward fulfilling the mission? What is it that a parish is especially suited for, organically created for? My view is that the parish church’s primary task is the renewal of baptismal identity and purpose in those related to the parish. The baptismal and Eucharistic community is about Glory, giving glory to God in liturgy and in human lives that are “real lives,” fully alive lives. The parish is a community and a place in which people share in the Glory of God. All of which is to say that the primary task of a parish is worship – it is adoration, reverence, devotion, and love.

Questions: Practice and Theory

If the mission and the primary task are in some sense “given,” then what else is needed as the diocese establishes its own way of being and doing? What else is needed to provide direction and focus to energies and resources?

I believe it’s useful to begin with questions that center our attention on a few significant areas of work. For example:

- What three things will we do this year to improve how we manage the routine business of diocesan life?
- What three things will we do this year to improve how we develop healthy and faithful parish churches?

-Given our current circumstances, what will make the most difference if we pay attention to it now?

Mission, Primary Task, Ways of Being and Doing

In summary, it may be useful to see a distinction among, and the interdependence of, three elements: 1) mission, 2) primary task, and 3) the ways of being and doing that take shape in diocesan culture and direction. The mission is “given” and is the whole church’s participation in God’s mission to restore all things to unity. Most dioceses carry out that mission in relationship to their parishes and the members of parishes as they touch the life of their own members and neighborhoods and communities.

Above – slightly revised from *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*, Robert a. Gallagher, Ascension Press, 2008

Assess your diocese

There are three areas that constitute the essential work of a bishop and a diocese.

1. The renewal and revitalization of parish churches.

The bishop needs to help all the parishes be communities that live and worship to the glory of God and in which the baptized are formed as instruments of God’s love in their lives in families, the workplace, with friends and in civic life. This includes seeing that all parishes have worship that sweeps people off their feet.

Very unsatisfied
with our work in
this area

Very satisfied with
our work in this
area

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2. Engaging the region of the diocese

The diocese can work for justice and compassion, in that state or city, on its own, as well as in cooperation with parishes and in collaboration with other denominations.

Very unsatisfied
with our work in
this area

Very satisfied with
our work in this
area

1	2	3	4	5
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3. Connecting the diocese with the larger church

The bishop is an essential connection with the national and international life of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. The bishop also has a responsibility to help parishes be grounded in the Anglican ethos.

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1	2	3	4	5
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