



THE RT. REV. STEVEN ANDREW MILLER, D.D.

BISHOP OF MILWAUKEE

August 5, 2013

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Grace to you and peace, in the Name of God whose very being is abundance.

I write you about a bold and exciting step forward for our diocese. The members of the Executive Council join me in believing that the debt reduction plan that has been adopted will prove fruitful, now and in the future. Under the plan, three congregations, St. Aidan's in Hartford, St. Bartholomew's in Pewaukee, and Good Shepherd in Sun Prairie, will be offered the opportunity to eliminate their debt through matching programs from the Diocese. In return, starting in 2015, the parish aid that they have been receiving will be re-directed to reduce assessments for all parishes.

Whether from personal experience, or through the experiences of others, each of us knows how crippling financial debt can be. In a family context, the strain that a dangerous level of debt can place is felt not only financially, but in every aspect of life, emotional, physical, and spiritual. The scriptures tell us that the earliest Christian communities pooled their resources and took special care of the widowed and orphaned. Deep in the Hebrew tradition is the concept of 'jubilee'—a time when debts are forgiven, and an even playing field is established once more.

For the last ten years I have been deeply concerned about the debt level in some of our congregations, particularly these three congregations. Each, in their present forms and locations, were the products of amalgamations or relocations, or both. And in each case, the financial footing on which they were established by the leadership of the diocese at that time has not proved sufficient to allow them to flourish.

Quite simply, each congregation was left with a mortgage for a new building which was, and continues to be, a real stretch for the members of those congregations to service. After 15 – 20 years of seeing these congregations struggle to meet their obligations, we have concluded that a different model of diocesan support of their ministry is needed if progress and growth are to occur.

At present, each of these congregations receives diocesan aid which exceeds their diocesan assessments and the total aid to these parishes exceeds their aggregate mortgage payments. Too much of their resources—of all kinds—are spent in servicing debt held either by the diocese or a local bank. As long as they remain mired in this situation, it is hard to see how they can grow into the fullness of life and witness that God intends for each of them.

The Executive Council of the diocese has been considering this situation, and looking at various possible scenarios for remedying it, for several years now. At the Council's July 25 meeting, action was taken to approve a plan whereby these congregations may partner with the diocese, each in a particular way, so as to become debt free by the middle of 2016.

Continued

Page 2
August 5, 2013

This will involve, in part, the raising of funds within the congregations, the forgiveness of outstanding obligations to the diocese, and matching funds from the diocese.

This decision must be seen in the larger context of rapidly changing diocesan finances. As you know all too well, the current assessment formula is proving more and more challenging for our congregations to honor each year. As we look forward to a time of reduced assessments for the parishes and operating income for the Diocese, the Executive Council and the Commission on Mission and Development anticipate a day in the near future when general diocese aid will be sharply reduced.

Faced with such realities in the not too distant future, the leadership of the diocese is working hard to best position the congregations to move forward from places of faithful forethought when it comes to mission and the funding for it, rather than find ourselves in hindsight ruing decisions which we did not make when the chance was ours.

The congregations who are being directly affected by this effort are, by no means, the only ones trying to deal with varying levels of debt and financial difficulty in faithful and creative ways, but they are where we are going to start, simply because it was a diocesan decision that put them in their current position, and as such, they need our attention first in this regard.

The Executive Council will continue to work to find solutions which may be of help to other congregations with their financial situations. More detailed information about this work will be forthcoming shortly, and I hope it will engender fruitful conversation across the diocese about the work God is calling us to, and how best to use the resources with which God has entrusted us for the purpose of being about that work.

This decision on the part of the elected leadership of the diocese is a visible reminder that each congregation, while set and focused in a particular area, is part of a much larger whole—the Diocese of Milwaukee, and as such, one congregation can never say of another ‘I have no need of you.’

I ask your prayers for all our congregations as they seek faithfully to meet the challenges of all sorts that are set before them, for the members of the Executive Council, and for me. And please be assured of my continued prayers and gratitude for all you do in the service of God’s Kingdom.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. A. Miller', written in a cursive style.

The Rt. Rev. Steven A. Miller
Bishop of Milwaukee

SAM/bjk