

Report of the Task Force on Resourcing God's Mission in our Diocese

Covenant is a relationship initiated by God, to which a body of people responds in faith.

Book of Common Prayer, p 846

Over 20 months ago, members of the Task Force began meeting in order to understand the challenges parishes were having in compliance with the Virginia Plan for Proportionate Giving. That plan had been established before several of the members of the group were born. That plan had been modified several times. That plan was not providing an effective way for the parishes of our Diocese to adequately fund the ministries we share as a diocese. We met over lunch. We broke bread. We learned each other's names and backgrounds and that two of our group had grown up in the same small town. We established relationships.

In truth, we were already in relationship. Because each of us had previously entered into a covenantal relationship with God, we had also entered into a relationship with one another. As our work unfolded, the conversation focused less on finances and more on relationship. We realized that we want our work to strengthen the bonds between us as a pre-requisite for strengthening the financial position of our annual budget.

We propose the [Virginia Plan for Covenantal Giving](#) to honor and recognize the goals of our shared ministry, which include financially resourcing our diocese in order to grow in our relationship and covenant with Jesus and our diocesan community. This plan will enable the Church to carry out and preach the Gospel, to make new disciples, and to raise up lay and ordained ministers.

It's broken. It hurts. It's a gift.

In scripture we learn how God makes covenants. We see the rainbow. We see the ram in the thicket. We envision the sands and the stars. We see the manger. We see the cross. But before each covenant is made, the context is that something could be better. It's not always easy to acknowledge the brokenness, but if we look it is there.

As we entered our work, we realized the brokenness of how we talked about finances on the Diocesan level. While emails, announcements, and webpages provided information and even inspiration, it seemed to us to be broken in its one-sidedness. Where was the opportunity for parishes to share the challenges they face in reaching out to their communities? Where was the avenue for building cooperation between parishes for shared ministries? How is the current system voluntary on only the side of the congregation?

We also realized the brokenness of how we defined faithful giving for the ministries of our Diocese. Because the plan for proportionate giving did not provide a clear definition of what should be included in calculating a fair share, several definitions had arisen among the congregations of our Diocese. In conversations on this topic between clergy who lead congregations, questions repeatedly arose about what should be included or not included. We realized we were seeking to support shared ministries but did not have a shared definition. The plan we propose provides a shared definition for all. That definition is found in the financial instructions of the Parochial Report which every congregation must complete. ¹

A sign. An act. A meal.

Scripturally, covenants are not offered in isolation. There are signs to remind us of the promise. There are actions that take place. There is community, often gathered around a meal.

One of the dynamics we were repeatedly pressed on was the issue of enforcement. “Will there be teeth in this?”, “What will be the stick?”, “How will you make congregations give?” The idea of covenant is based upon abundance, promises, and life giving practices. While our proposed plan maintains the standard of voluntary giving, we do seek to have this plan codified in the Canons of our Diocese and offer [C-7](#) for consideration. While we do not prohibit grant funds to those congregations that are not participating in the Covenantal Plan, it should be noted that the same body, our Executive Board, that authorizes the grants also will lead the adjustment process. The language of those grant applications which state the expected giving relationship has not changed.

In many ways, the fullness of our Diocesan life is seen when we gather. At Convention and clergy conferences, we build relationships, we hear stories, we pray, we break bread, we share in the Sacraments. As a sign of our covenantal relationship, barriers to these gatherings should be minimized. The plan we offer assumes that we want every eligible member to gather and removes registration fees.

It is not anticipated that every worshipping community will be able to meet the asking (only about 1/3 of congregations meet the standards of the current plan). For those who are challenged to meet the asking, we seek to create an avenue for wider understanding of the demands faced by that congregation. The current practice does not promote shared understanding between congregations or between congregations and our Executive Board. Taking a best practice from other dioceses, we propose a series of geographically based gatherings where ministries and challenges are shared. One result of the gatherings will be adjustments to askings.

A new way of living.

With each covenant in Scripture, a new way of living follows. We envision new patterns of our shared ministry if the Covenantal Plan for Giving is adopted.

In the plan we recommend, the Treasurer of the Diocese has the role of reporting to each congregation what their asking will be for the upcoming year. This is to be done in late Spring so that vestries and clergy can reflect and consider how this asking can be accomplished. The congregation’s pledge is still due in the early fall so that our Diocesan budgeting process can take place.

The role of our Executive Board will expand. Currently, our Executive Board has the responsibility of preparing the budget for our shared ministries. The Executive Board also has the duty of authorizing grants to congregations. These duties deal primarily with where resources go. We see the need for the Executive Board to be involved in the process of where the resources come from. Our plan has members of the Executive Board in the role of hearing the stories of congregations who are challenged to meet the asking and empowering them to make adjustments, on behalf of the entire Diocese, to those asking amounts. In this we seek to recognize that ministries at the parochial level are in many, many ways ministries at the diocesan level.

Perhaps our greatest hope for a new pattern is how the concept of tithing will be enhanced. The tithe, the practice of returning to God a 10th, goes back to the story of Abraham; it is not a new concept. We seek to have this practice as the model of congregational giving and hope to spark conversations in vestries and pews about individual tithing. In this way, we hope not only for financial resources for each congregation but also a fuller expression of discipleship as more and more members pattern their lives as sharing the bounty of God's blessings. We see the concept of the tithe as a response to God that is life giving and life changing.

The Journey.

A covenant is a relationship initiated by God, to which a body of people responds in faith. Relationships have moments of definition. We, the Task Force, do not see our work ending with the passage of our proposed Covenantal Giving Plan. We anticipate our work continuing until the Summer of 2022. Assuming the passage of our proposal, we will work with the Executive Board to implement and refine their role in this process. We will also continue our work with our Diocesan staff to ensure they have resources for the implementation of this new way of doing things.

With gratitude for the prayers of many and the work of Mr. Mark Eastham, the Rev. Torrence Harman, Mrs. Stephanie Gurnsey Higgins, the Rev. Chris Miller, the Rev. Kathleen Murray, Mr. Ken Royston, the Very Rev. Barbara Seward, Mr. Bob Steventon, Mrs. Suzanne Stroup, and the Rt. Rev. Porter Taylor, I remain

In Christ,

The Rev. Sven vanBaars (Chair)

Notes

¹ From the Parochial Report Instructions – “Plate offerings, pledge payments, & regular support (line 3) Include on this line all giving from individuals for the general support of the congregation. In most congregations this will be the largest income figure and will not be significantly below a congregation's operating expenses. Do not leave this item blank or report an absurdly low figure! Examples of income to report:

- Loose plate offerings
- All payments toward pledges
- All amounts in regular offering envelopes, including the envelopes of members of the Church School
- All unpledged or undesignated offerings. Include Easter, Christmas, etc., if used for operating purposes
- Payments from persons who made no pledge or declined to use envelopes.
- All donations “restricted” for operating purposes, e.g., donations for flowers, fuel oil, the diocesan assessment, support of the clergy, etc.
- Donations from visitors or persons not members of the congregation”

This can also be found at [CHAPTER VIII: PAROCHIAL REPORTS \(generalconvention.org\)](http://generalconvention.org)