

SISTER PARISH RELATIONSHIPS:

AN EXPRESSION OF MISSION TODAY WITHIN THE DIOCESE OF SAINT CLOUD

- I) **Introduction:** This document serves as a guide to starting a Sister Parish Relationship. It was approved by the St. Cloud Mission Office Board of Directors on June 7, 2005. A Sister Parish Relationship for the St. Cloud Diocese means an officially recognized agreement between a parish in the St. Cloud Diocese and a parish in any other diocese. Sister Parish Agreements may involve parishes within or outside of the United States.
- II) **Contemporary Missiology:** The value to the Church in promoting sister parish relationships rises from current developments in the understanding of “mission”. In the past, mission primarily meant going forth to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and to plant the Church among people who had not yet received the good news. Mission and missionary work in the St. Cloud Diocese included the sending of priests, Sisters and lay Catholics to collaborate in the growth of less well established local churches such as the Diocese of Maracay, Venezuela. And the Diocese has very generously given financial support to the general missionary work of the Church through the Propagation of the Faith and in support of Religious communities such as the Crosiers, Franciscans, Benedictines and Maryknoll. Also, on a local level, the Diocese has had highly active mission groups of women in virtually every parish who made huge contributions of handmade items such as quilts, layettes, rosaries and various other useful items which were sent to needy people throughout the world.

These activities have been and will continue to be important, but in our current ecclesial reality we are also called to perform a more complex task. The challenge of mission today involves creating bridges of various kinds to establish mutual bonds of support to strengthen the unity of our global, catholic Church. In carrying out this mission task we are able to bring together diverse members of our faith communities thus gaining deeper appreciation, new energy and love for one another, truly celebrating our oneness in the Body of Christ.

In today’s complex world, *“Mission takes place where people interact with people, seeking to overcome all that separates people from one another and from God”* (CANACOM Caribbean and North American Council for Mission). Mission is a process of mutual self-giving and receiving for and with others, as modeled in our triune God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who invites us to enter into His communion of boundless self-giving love. We become missionaries when we respond to God’s gifts to us by putting those gifts to work in building right relationships with others, creating local and global communities in which mutual sharing of gifts allows each person to be the unique person s/he is, while at the same time contributing to the whole. Such relationships commit us to transform our dioceses and our world into the Reign of love, justice and peace of Christ.

- III) **Defining a Sister Parish:** At the heart of a Sister Parish Relationship is the desire to be connected with each other and with God. It is manifested in a commitment of solidarity between two parish communities. It is one way of responding to our United States Bishops call to *“mark the new millennium by making our families and local communities of faith signs of*

genuine solidarity – praying, teaching, preaching and acting with new urgency and creativity on the international obligations of our faith” (Called to Global Solidarity, U.S. Bishops).

In an age when technology is bridging the physical distances that divide us from others around the world, we must also work earnestly to bridge the misunderstandings and inequalities that exist between us and our brothers and sisters in other countries. We have much to learn from each other!

The form that a particular Sister Parish Relationship takes depends entirely on the two parishes involved, on the creativity and gifts of the members of the two parishes. Sharing each other’s faith journey, learning about each other’s culture and worship styles, concern for the well-being of the other, all enhance our understanding of the word “neighbor” and contribute to an appreciation of the global dimensions of our Church. Establishing a Sister Parish Relationship is an evolutionary process requiring a dedicated committee within each parish and involving the support of the parish priests and dioceses, but the reward for the joint effort is great.

Pakisa Tshimika and Tim Lind, in their book, Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith, state, *“We found that all around the world, in very diverse cultures and societies and churches, on all of the continents, people long for direct connections with others. Congregations want to be in relationship with congregations that are different from them. There is a strong desire for sharing relationships. This is the motivating force for gift sharing.*

IV) Guiding Principles for Starting a Sister Parish Relationship

A critical understanding in building a Sister Parish relationship is just that . . . understanding that both parties must want to enter into a process of learning so that they have an understanding of each other’s reality and can build on each other’s trust. Marriage seems complex, but it is a relationship built on the same principles of understanding, mutual trust and love. Parish organizations are more complex, more diverse, and frequently more political in operation, but to form a union, they must be able to arrive at the same levels of trust and understanding.

Mission arrangements are multi-directional, meaning they involve both giving and receiving. It is not the intent that one parish should dominate and send, but that both parishes should understand and support each other through prayer, visitation, communication, and gift sharing. All churches are both “sending” and “receiving” churches— all Christians, based on the very nature of our baptism, are called to be missionary and everyone has God-given gifts to share.

Some guiding principles from Catholic documents are:

- The richer nations/peoples must abandon attempts to dominate.
- Poor peoples and nations must be full participants and the primary agents of their advancement, recognizing their own needs and identifying their own priorities.
- PARTICIPATION is as important, if not more important, than economic growth for development of the human race.
- The largest number of people should be active at every level.
- Cultural and spiritual values must be respected – in fact; they have much to contribute to the human race.

- Only through collaboration, coordination and genuine dialogue can true progress be made.
- It is not a matter of “giving from one’s surplus,” but of changing lifestyles, commercial patterns and power structures which institutionalize injustice and undermine the common good.

(Mater et Magistra, John XXIII; Gaudium et Spes, Vat. II; Justice in the World, World Synod of Bishops 1971; Populorum Progressio, Paul VI; On Social Concern and Centesimus Annus, John Paul II)

Getting Started towards a Sister Parish Relationship

1. **Build initial support in the Parish.** Develop support for a relationship among key people including council members, mission circles, parish staff and the pastor.
2. **Contact the Diocesan Mission Office (320-251-1100).** Arrange to meet with Mission Office personnel for support and to discuss possible sister parishes.
3. **Develop an Organizational Committee.** This should be a committee of 5 to 15 people who have expressed an interest in a Sister Parish Relationship. The primary responsibility of this committee is to initiate and develop the relationship. This committee should commit time to reading information on faith partnerships, visiting existing relationships, and making tentative contact through the Mission Office with possible sister parishes.
4. **Organizational Committee Responsibilities.** The organizational committee should begin to work on a document that includes:
 - Mission and Purpose of the Sister Parish Relationship (This document will likely be changed later when the two parishes develop a joint mission statement)
 - Goals of the relationship (your initials goals, which can later be used as you discuss with your partner their goals)
 - Gain support of the Pastor and Parish Council
 - Formalize the role of the Organizational Committee
5. **Organization Committee (may change name to other options such as Sister Parish Committee, etc.) identifies Sister Parish**
 - Obtain a listing of one or more parishes that are interested in Sister Parish Relationship
 - Discuss options with Mission Office and key personnel in the home parish
 - Make contact with the possible Sister Parish to discuss goals and arrangements. Seek input from Mission Office and missionaries who have served on mission assignments in the parish or diocese being considered.
 - Seek approval from Parish Council to establish the relationship.
6. **Broadening the Support Base and Building a Relationship.** Invite a speaker to come to Mass to share their experiences. This may also include meeting with the Men’s Club, Mission Group, Social Concerns Committee, Knights of Columbus, Christian Women and other organizations in the parish. A *relationship* is very dependent on communication.
7. **Formalizing the relationship**
 - A visit involving key people should be initiated to formalize the intent to become Sister Parishes. This can involve considerable time and effort because of travel arrangements and agreements.

- Share goals, hopes, and activities that are anticipated. The efforts of the Organizational Committee should be discussed with necessary modifications made to assure agreement.
- Seek ways to assure communications between the parishes. Discuss barriers such as language, travel, changing pastors, etc. that cause a lack of continuity to a Sister Parish.
- Determine who will be the communicators and with whom.
- Establish various means of communication including telephone, letters, email, websites, diocesan newspapers and newsletters, travel delegations.
- Identify how communication will be spread both internally and externally in both parishes.
- Establish a pattern that determines frequency of communication. Make sure that all communication, gift giving, requested prayers, etc. are responded to by the Sister Parish.
- Plan effective faith sojourns to visit each other.
- Keep the Diocesan Mission Office informed of your relationship.
- Send parish representatives to the Partnership Learning Sessions offered by the St. Cloud Mission Office every 18 months.

Sustaining a Sister Parish Relationship

1. **Broad Based Parish Ownership.** The longevity of a sister parish relationship and its impact on parish life will depend in large measure on how thoroughly it is integrated into all aspects of the parish. If it is simply one of many extra activities or is the special project of a few dedicated individuals it will either not survive or will not transform the parish's vision vis-à-vis the global Church. Thus a priority must be the buy-in on every level, starting with the pastor and the parish professional staff, including especially the parish religious education program. Thereafter each parish based organization or program should make this global partnership an integral dimension of their stated mission or purpose.
2. **Operational Committee.** This committee could be the same group of people that were originally involved in the Organizational Committee. The intent is to formalize a committee that has responsibility for promoting the welfare of the Sister Parish Relationship.
 - Monetary considerations can occur in starting and maintaining a Sister Parish Relationship. It is recommended that the Operational Committee be provided a budget to meet these operational requirements.
 - The Operational Committee should seek to establish the normal operational procedures and offices as commonly identified in Robert's Rules of Order or an alternative consensus model.
3. **Pastoral Changes.** Procedures for changing of a pastor in a parish are to be anticipated and should be planned for by the parishes involved in the Sister Parish Relationship. The Operational Committees of the parishes should have established directional statements and goals that support the international mission appeal of the Bishops and the established parish organization. The parish committees may be called upon to provide the necessary leadership during these transitions. In many instances a number of commitments may have been made in the Sister Parish Relationship that need to be honored.

4. **Periodic Evaluation.** It is strongly recommended that a periodic process of assessment and evaluation be put into practice. Key elements of the evaluation process may include:
 - Review of mission, purpose and goals of the Sister Parish Relationship. It is recommended that this be done by both involved parishes.
 - Develop and maintain a program of visitation between the involved parishes.
 - Review levels of communication between key individuals, committees, and pastors.
5. **The Role of Participating Bishops.** The Bishop performs an essential role in the establishment and maintenance of a Sister Parish Relationship. These responsibilities include:
 - Support and clarification of documented regulations and guidelines used to establish Sister Parish Relationships.
 - Where there are sister parish relationships, consideration should be taken for selection of a pastor who is knowledgeable and supportive of such relationships.
6. **Role of Diocesan Partnership Leadership Committees.** The St. Cloud Diocese has two diocesan partnerships, in Venezuela and Kenya. These relationships are guided by two Leadership Committees. These are the Maracay-St. Cloud Liaison Committee and the Homa Bay-St. Cloud Leadership Team.
 - The Leadership Committees are available to provide support to Sister Parish initiatives, assisting them during both the developmental and operational stages. They can assist in providing necessary education about Sister Parish Relationships to pastors, parish committee members, parish staff and community members.
 - The Leadership Committee of a geographic region should be advised of initiatives in that region by the local parishes creating a Sister Parish Relationship.

Essential Standards Required for a Sister Parish Relationship

It is anticipated that a number of efforts will be made that could lead to the development of a new Sister Parish Relationship. At the same time, Sister Parish Relationships may cease to exist because of changing events throughout the world, personnel changes, and the desire on the part of the people to expend the necessary interest and resources needed to maintain the relationship. The following **Minimum Standards** should be met to maintain a defined relationship.

1. **Formalized Agreement.** A document defining the relationship between the Sister Parishes be maintained by the parishes and shared with the Diocesan Mission Office.
2. **Organizational and/or Operational Committee.** The parishes involved in the relationship should keep the Diocesan Mission Office apprised of the development of the relationship. The number of meetings can be determined by the local parish but periodic meetings (a minimum of 4 meetings has been suggested) should be planned. During the introductory stages of planning and developing a Sister Parish Relationship it is anticipated that more frequent meetings will be required.
3. **Financial Support.** The parishes involved in the relationship should maintain a small allocation of money supporting communications, office supplies, and other essential activities. This should be reflected as a line item account.

4. **Communications.** A person should be designated in each of the involved parishes as the key person responsible for communications between the parishes. In some instances this may be the parish priest but more frequently it would be a member of the Organization/Operational committee. Additionally, parish leadership within each parish, including the pastor and staff, should be kept informed of and engaged in, the on-going efforts of the committees. Someone charged to oversee internal communication should also be designated in each parish.
5. **Prayer for the Sister Parish.** Prayer is the great communicator and unifier of Christians. Include your Sister Parish in Prayer Intentions at Mass and give special attention to continued growth in Jesus Christ and openness to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit.

Why Should We Exercise Care in Gift Sharing?

Without dialogue and relationship there is not broad participation; not only will “projects” fail, but people’s human dignity will be violated. God endowed all human beings with gifts, and desires that everyone be allowed to contribute to the common good. We all know the value of work and the self-realization that comes to us through our work. All peoples wish to realize the full potential for which God created them by contributing and sharing the gifts they have been given. As Jean Vanier, founder of the La Arche Communities states:

“To love is not to give what we have, but to bring out the richness that is already in others. . . Love is not to do things for others. One can do things for others but at the same time stifle what they can do for themselves. To love is to bring out the self-confidence and beauty of others . . . to enable people to stand up and be free. But this takes time.”

Depending on how it is done, gift-giving can contribute to or detract from human dignity. It can build relationships or create competition and disunity. There is no easy mold; sometime it requires living in a creative tension between meeting direct, urgent needs and fostering participation, development, and formation. It can also mean living in tension between the way our society shares gifts and the way another society shares gifts.

The spiritual rewards are worth the struggle and effort.