

Parishioners Have Their Say Counted

By Jack Risk, Coordinator of Mission Development

Is it possible for an entire diocese to take part in putting together a diocesan budget? Last Spring, a first effort was made to try to make this happen.

The 2006 Diocesan Synod had decided that it wanted to look at two years' proposed budgets the next time Synod met, in November 2008. To prepare for this, three of the committees of the diocese — Budget Committee, Diocesan Executive and the Way Forward Management Council — began to ask themselves how they could design a process to allow parishioners to give their input into the 2009 and 2010 budgets. There had already been, for some time, something known as *Common Ministry and Mission* which was trying to figure out the best formula for parishes to contribute to the income side of the diocesan budget. Now seemed the time to start asking people how they thought that money should be used after it was forwarded to the diocese. A collaborative approach quickly developed and a small team of diocesan volunteers and staff set to work to find a way.

What was needed was something a little out of the ordinary. Parishes have traditionally given feedback on budget documents once they were developed — at Archdeaconry meetings, in submissions to the diocese and at Synod. But now the question was, “What should be included in the budget in the first place?” We needed to find a way for people to give their answers to that question that was simple yet meaningful. There is too much going on in a diocesan budget to expect every parishioner to make informed decisions on every item. This would be an unfair responsibility to impose on them. Also, not every particular wish can get translated into dollars spent out of the common purse. In a democracy competing interests need to be sorted out through deliberation, a rational way needs to be found to reconcile differing views. But how were we going to reach agreement on all the various possibilities that people might put forward?

It seemed to us that the only way to have a productive conversation around these money issues would be if people could look at them in terms of some common purpose. If there was a shared sense of the mission of the diocese, then the budget could reflect what we had in common. If we all felt we were trying to achieve the same things, then agreeing would be easier. The question, “What is God calling us — together — to do in this place?” could form the basis of a conversation between the parishes and diocese, a conversation that could lead to a sense of our responding together to God's call to mission. The planning committee began saying to itself “money follows mission.”

But we also asked ourselves, “Do people have a sense of participating in a common mission?” That set us to considering the current budget and asking whether it reflected the common mission of the diocese. We took a hard look at the *Way Forward*. The *Way Forward* is something else that had come out of Synod 2006. It is the diocese' strategic vision for how it plans to move forward over the next three-to-five years. In effect, it is the mission of the diocese. It also provides a framework around which money decisions might be made.

First thing to do was to see what we were already doing to support the work of the *Way Forward*. Every item in the 2008 budget, including staff time and administrative costs, was examined to see which of the goals of the *Way Forward* it served. Having pulled apart all the expenditures we were able to devise a Narrative Budget that presented the 2008 budget as seen through the lens of the *Way Forward*. We felt this could help people understand the budget from the perspective of shared mission.

The essence of the process began to emerge when we realized that it was people's hopes for mission that mattered most. This was how new directions and emphases could be introduced into the budget. "What do parishioners value about the work of the diocese and what do they want to see happen?" This meant we had to have a way for parishioners to tell us what they thought was important in the way of mission. We were going to invite them, not simply to comment on how money was being spent, but to dream about how it ought to be spent.

We put together a process that would allow every person to be interviewed about their best experiences of mission and from those stories to identify the sorts of things that are important to them and that bring life to mission efforts. With this preparation they would then indicate what their priorities for mission were. We used the Five Directions of the *Way Forward* as the basis of this priority-setting exercise because they laid out several key sets of goals for the diocesan mission. The Narrative Budget and an update on Common Ministry and Mission rounded out the process.

Our team of planners turned themselves into facilitators and tried out the process at Regional Deanery meetings during March. Regional meetings had not been used in some years. We felt they would give us a good sense of local perspectives. After six regional meetings we had made several changes to our process and were feeling that it was working pretty well. Now it was time to approach the parishes.

To make this effort work we knew we would need help. Running a ninety-minute process in every one of the seventy parishes of the diocese was going to take a lot more facilitators. We asked for volunteers and twenty lay and clergy persons came forward to help with the project. Three training sessions were held for them during March. We adopted Jesus' model of sending people out in twos. These facilitators emerged as a real resource that the diocese has going for it.

Under the banner of *Have Your Say Counted* the parishes were invited to take advantage of the offered meetings. By the end of May over forty parishes had had a chance to have their say counted. Parishes expressed satisfaction at being engaged by the diocese on this topic. There was a sense of a conversation having been opened around how to build a budget on the basis of a shared sense of mission to God's world.

The results of people's input were handed over to the Budget Committee. They had the job, over the summer, of making sense of it all and finding ways to apply people's priorities for mission against the new budgets.

In an article next month we will look at what the outcomes were of *Have Your Say Counted*.