

What We Heard

Report on Listening and Data Gathering of the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Southern Ohio

Upon the resignation of Bishop Thomas Breidenthal on November 29, 2020, the Standing Committee became the Ecclesiastical Authority of the Diocese of Southern Ohio. In late 2020, we (the Standing Committee) said that we would spend several months to undertake study of the diocese to understand the needs, concerns, and hopes of as we look to a time of transition. Our urgent question was whether or not immediately to begin the process leading to the search, election, and ordination of our next bishop by appointing a search committee.

Early on, it became clear that we as a diocese are not ready for this step. As you will read below, we have established benchmarks that will help us on the Standing Committee know when we are ready to begin the search process. Until then, we are in a time of transition as we work to celebrate our diocese's strengths to improve some identified areas of necessary improvement.

This is a summary of what we have learned so far in our data gathering and listening.

Landscape Online Survey

Holy Cow! Consulting conducted a diocesan-wide survey of clergy, staff, lay leaders, and parishioners. About 1,300 people took the online survey, giving us a solid sample.

You can link to our [initial communication sharing the findings](#) on the diocesan website, and from there you can watch a narrated video presentation or view presentation slides. In summary, the findings were:

- Our diocese is in a place of low energy and low satisfaction, especially clergy
- People in the diocese have experienced a lack of trust and do not feel connected with diocesan decision-making
- Congregational development is a relative strength
- Our former bishop's publicly disclosed alcohol addiction issues must be addressed within our diocesan culture, but they are not the central, defining issues for this moment

Zoom Listening Sessions

New Realm Consulting hosted listening sessions on Zoom for active priests, retired priests, deacons, lay leaders, and parishioners. The sessions were

geared around hearing likes, concerns, and hopes — that is, what do people make of our diocese at this present moment.

Five key themes emerged, as reported to us by the consultant

1. The most frequently expressed concern was a lack of collegiality and connection in the diocese. Continuing some form of listening and engagement opportunities for more colleagues to connect more frequently will be important for the collective ownership.
2. Tied to number 1: that disconnect also seemed to be exhibited as a disconnect from the diocese itself. Parishes, especially smaller or less wealthy parishes, have felt neglected, ignored or, at worst, blatantly abandoned by the diocese.
3. There was good energy around Becoming Beloved Community (which is a great thing), but we sense is also that some of this excitement exists because it has provided some cohesive mission and purpose where there was a lack before.
4. There was surprisingly little mention of the alcoholism or substance abuse in any of the seven sessions. Even though there were some profound insights into 50 years old systemic issues related to money/power that might have contributed to and supported this behavior, when it did come up the group often moved on quickly.
5. Across the board it seems that Bishop Price provided some pastoral care that has been an intensely deep-felt need by many. For some, it was just having someone actually reach out – for others, especially those in more rural locations or further from Cincinnati, it was expressed as an acknowledgement of their worth.

Staff One-on-One Interviews

We contracted with Flo DeWitt, a licensed pastoral counselor, to interview each member of the diocesan staff individually and confidentially. Our aim was to understand the health of the staff work culture and to understand whether our former bishop's alcohol addiction had negatively impacted staff.

- Staff generally reported being pleased to serve on diocesan staff
- The reorganization tied with the cathedral-diocese collaboration was a source of concern
- Staff do not always feel empowered to do their work
- Most staff were surprised by the revelation of the bishop's alcohol addiction, and some wonder why the topic continues to be addressed
- Some staff appreciated the Standing Committee's work, but others felt that the Standing Committee has not been sufficiently attentive and supportive

Clergy Check-In Calls

During Eastertide, the Standing Committee attempted to contact all clergy on the list of active clergy provided by diocesan staff. Many calls were made, but some Standing Committee members have not yet completed their calls. These are ongoing. Still, enough calls have been made to paint a consistent picture.

- Clergy were almost universally grateful to have someone “from diocesan leadership” call to check in. They expressed hope this will be a practice in the future, from the bishop, or the staff, or other leaders.
- Clergy have struggled during the pandemic, but most are feeling optimistic for their future and the future of their congregations. Some clergy continue to struggle with loss, isolation, and grief.
- Most expressed a positive view of the Standing Committee’s leadership in this transitional time. If the topic of episcopal leadership came up, they generally said that an outside provisional bishop is what we need during the longer phase of our transition.
- Many said they appreciated some of the pastoral care efforts initiated by Bishop Price during his time as Bishop in Southern Ohio. They named, especially, monthly zoom calls with clergy.
- Clergy consistently said they want our diocese to be healthier — and believe it can become healthier — and they want the Standing Committee to “take whatever time is needed” during the transition, not to rush.

Emails to standingcommittee@diosohio.org

We have consistently invited people to contact the Standing Committee at our email address, standingcommittee@diosohio.org. This invitation remains open, and you are welcome to contact us any time with suggestions, comments, or questions.

Some people have written to express gratitude or appreciation, but most emails have been to express concern about various aspects of our diocesan life.

- Several people wrote to express appreciation for Bishop Price and to share their hope that he continue in the role he has occupied since December 2020.
- Several people wrote to express concern about the cathedral-diocesan collaboration and its impact on diocesan staff and the use of diocesan resources.
- Several people have expressed a desire to have more representation and involvement in diocesan leadership from outside Cincinnati.

Conclusion

In summary, from what we have heard the Standing Committee understands

- We need to focus on relationship- and trust-building in our diocese. This includes efforts to help people feel connected to diocesan staff and leadership bodies and relationships across the various geographic regions of our diocese. Transparency in decision-making and use of resources is key.
- We need to find ways to support clergy and congregations who may feel isolated.
- We need to reach the point where we can appreciate Bishop Breidenthal's episcopate — especially his commitment to truth-telling and reconciliation — while also acknowledging that his alcohol addiction did not receive the prompt attention it might have in a healthier system.
- There are several areas of our diocesan life that we hope our provisional bishop can help us understand, evaluate, and improve. These would include cathedral-diocesan collaboration, transparency of diocesan staff and leadership bodies, racial justice, and support of struggling congregations.
- We need to seek broader representation of the wider diocese on Standing Committee, but also on other diocesan leadership bodies. While this is partly an issue of people who might run for office, it is also an issue of where meetings are held, for example.