

PORTRAITS IN COLLABORATION

A Bishop Takes the Lead in Wichita



NEW COVENANT

A national study of collaboration, sponsored by Catholic Charities USA and the Catholic Health Association, was undertaken in 2002 to assess the state of collaboration in Catholic ministries across the United States. The study was conducted by Health Systems Research, Inc., and was funded in part by a grant from SC Ministry Foundation. As part of the study, researchers visited five sites (St. Petersburg/Tampa, FL; Cleveland; Wichita, KS; Orange County, CA; and Albany, NY) to learn what makes for successful collaboration. This is the third in a series of articles for Health Progress highlighting the findings from this study, which will be available later this year.

Wichita is the largest city in Kansas. The city's economy boomed through much of the 1990s, in large part because of the vibrancy of the aircraft industry, which is heavily represented in the city. In the past few years the industry has been beset by layoffs, and the Wichita economy has struggled.

Various organizational factors and service delivery issues brought the Wichita Catholic institutions together in an effort to address current and emerging community issues. The consolidation of two Catholic hospitals into the Via Christi Health System, as well as hospital mergers in other communities, created the opportunity to do things differently in Wichita and also provided the local religious communities with mission funds for reinvestment in the community. At the same time, Catholic Charities was interested in expanding its services and becoming a behavioral health care provider for the hospitals.

Concurrently, the church was confronting the question of how best to address the needs of a growing Hispanic population. Given organiza-

tional changes in the two hospitals, the availability of new resources, and Catholic Charities' interest in expanding services, the bishop saw an opportunity to improve the provision of services in the community by strengthening collaboration between Catholic health care, Catholic social services, and Catholic education systems. The bishop recognized that, as a result of such collaboration, these systems would be better able to fulfill their mission of serving the community.

The Bishop's Community Task Force was therefore created. Collaboration partners include:

- Via Christi Health System
- Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Wichita
- Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita
- Sister Adorers of the Blood of Christ
- Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother
- Catholic schools
- Newman University
- Diocese of Wichita

The Via Christi Health System was formed in 1995 after the consolidation of two Catholic hospitals in Wichita, one sponsored by the Sisters of St. Joseph and the other by the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother. The Catholic Charities agency covers central and southeast Kansas and has been a presence in the community since 1943.

Two factors that played a role in shaping the collaboration were the influx of Hispanic immigrants into the area and the existence of an economically stressed central business district. The Hispanic population has increased in the city of Wichita and in other areas of southeastern Kansas, which are also part of the diocese. These areas include small towns with meatpacking and other industrial plants that draw immigrants in search of jobs. The Wichita diocesan cathedral is located in the central business district, an area experiencing an array of inner-city problems, including homelessness.

COLLABORATION

To initiate the process of collaboration, Bishop Eugene J. Gerber convened the Bishop's Community Task Force, which included representatives of each of the partner organizations. The ongoing goal of the task force is to identify unmet community needs and create strategies to address those needs. Having done this, the task force continues to identify and mobilize resources that can be shared, repositioned, or targeted to address community needs. The task force has developed projects under its own auspices and has also helped to facilitate other collaborative efforts that draw on the special ministries of the various members. The work of the task force has facilitated a strong climate of collaboration in the community. Relationships have been strengthened as a result of meeting regularly every four to six weeks.

A strong sense of mission on the part of the health care system CEO and the communication of that mission through the conduct of ongoing lay leadership training for system staff have also promoted the use of a collaborative approach to addressing community problems. The system created a new position: director of community mission services; this person's responsibilities include handling task force issues and promoting collaboration with all the Catholic institutions active in Wichita. The task force's projects provide members with an opportunity to put into operation their collective sense of mission and enable them to reach out and work with other-than-Catholic partners in this process.

RESULTS

The collaborative has successfully launched a number of initiatives.

Office of Hispanic Ministry The bishop requested that the task force's first effort be developing support for a new Office of Hispanic Ministry and a Hispanic Pastoral Center. Under the leadership of the task force, money was raised to fund a Hispanic social-worker position in Catholic Charities. The social worker has become a major resource for the Hispanic community, helping residents obtain emergency financial and food assistance and medical services. The Hispanic ministry has continued to grow, and the diocese now funds a position focused on the spiritual needs of Hispanics throughout southeastern Kansas.

The Lord's Diner The task force led the effort to develop an accessible facility able to provide an evening meal seven days a week to people in need. The initiative was embraced not only by Catholics but also by the larger ecumenical community and, ultimately, by the city as a whole.

As a result of a hugely successful fund-raising effort and the donated work of many community

partners, a debt-free, \$1.5 million state-of-the-art facility was built. Contractors and architects contributed their labor, and sufficient money was raised to cover operating costs for at least a year and a half. The expectation is that by the time the initial funds are exhausted, the program will have developed its own funding sources to cover operating expenses. Churches and businesses throughout the community have responded to this community need by providing more than 2,000 volunteers to assist the four-person paid staff. The diner serves more than 350 people each evening.

School Nurse Project This program was developed to address the health care needs of children in parochial schools that did not have a school nurse on site. To accomplish this, a partnership was formed in 1998 with the Via Christi Regional Medical Center, the nursing programs of Newman and Wichita State universities, and the diocese.

The program, which began with three pilot schools attended by large numbers of children enrolled in the free/reduced lunch program, now includes more than 20 parochial and private schools. Two additional accredited nursing programs have joined the project. Under the supervision of a Via Christi nurse manager, nursing students conduct health screenings, teacher education, and health promotion activities on the school premises. Families eligible for Medicaid or State Children's Health Insurance Program are provided with information and guidance about enrolling in them. Children who are screened by the student nurses and found to be in need of follow-up services but who do not have a regular source of health care are referred to Via Christi and other community health facilities for ongoing care.

Catholic Health Academy Responding to a longstanding shortage of health care workers, Via Christi, the local Catholic high schools, and the local Catholic university have developed a hospital-based program designed to expose high school students to career opportunities available in Catholic health care organizations. At the completion of the first semester, the 20 students enrolled in the program were offered college scholarships and summer employment at the hospital. Currently, 10 of the students are planning to pursue careers in the health care field: seven in nursing, one in medicine, one in social work, and another in laboratory technology. The remainder of the students report that although they will more than likely enter a health-related field, they have not as yet reached a final decision.

The Catholic Care Center The Catholic Care Center is located on a large tract of diocesan land and consists of a skilled nursing center and a center for retired priests. Currently, additional units for residents in need of assisted living and a memory care

center for people with Alzheimer's disease are under construction. The Diocese of Wichita was originally the sole owner of the center, but ownership is now shared by the diocese and Via Christi Health System, with the latter being responsible for management of the center.

Adult Day Services Catholic Charities provides an array of adult day services for senior citizens and adults with disabilities. A variety of programs serving diverse groups are offered, including an active seniors' program, an Alzheimer's/dementia day program, and vocational training for adults with mental retardation and/or developmental disabilities. Participants are provided with case management services, nutritious meals, and the opportunity to participate in a range of activities. As a result of the collaborative relationship between Via Christi and Catholic Charities, the former folded the adult program it had been running independently into the more comprehensive program offered by Catholic Charities. This helped strengthen the Catholic Charities program because it no longer had to compete for resources with the health care system.

LESSONS LEARNED

The Wichita partners say they have learned four valuable lessons.

The Bishop's Active Involvement Facilitates Collaboration

The success of the Wichita collaboration demonstrates the importance of the bishop's active involvement in promoting and sustaining effective collaboration among Catholic institutions and their community partners. In this community, the bishop's vision and his outgoing, engaging personality brought the partners together—and the authority granted to the bishop, coupled with respect for him, keeps the partners at the table. The task force provides both a reason for the organizations to come together and a structure that allows them to do so.

Trust Overcomes Misunderstandings The experience of working together has, over time, allowed trust to build, and this trust has helped the partners overcome the misunderstandings that are often the product of false assumptions and unpleasant history. As the hospital CEO pointed out, "We need to get past what used to be and get on with what can be." The relationships that have been fostered through task force participation have also contributed to the partners coming together more often on an informal basis, demonstrating that collaboration can become a style of doing business and not simply a "project."

Be Clear About Expectations and Abilities One reason for the task force's success is the willingness of partners to be up front about what they can and cannot do and about their differing opinions. When

the task force was created, Via Christi made it clear that other partners had to recognize that it was not going to be able to provide all the funds to support group projects. Instead, the partners were encouraged to work together to find ways to develop and fund projects that benefit the community.

Dealing with this "myth of deep pockets" early on made it possible for the task force to avoid later misunderstanding and hurt feelings, which could have destroyed the collaboration effort. This also helped the partners realize that what is essential was not the particular contribution but rather the fact that *everyone* in the collaborative contributes something. These contributions can include a range of important commodities, such as community connections, service delivery expertise, and fund-raising experience, as well as actual dollars.

There Are Both Short- and Long-Term Payoffs Although the major projects sparked by and facilitated through the task force are extremely beneficial to the community, the task force members are clear that the payoffs for them and the community are not limited to the specific projects. A significant payoff is the strengthening of the relationships among the Catholic institutions. Administrators from the various institutions say that working together has made them more willing to pick up the telephone, call colleagues, and have a discussion about mutual concerns, issues, and opportunities. For the Catholic mission, the visibility of task force initiatives and spin-off projects presents the image of a church actively engaged in the community and fulfilling its mission of serving those in need.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The collaboration continues to thrive. Although Bishop Gerber has retired, his successor, Bishop Thomas J. Olmstead, has embraced the task force's work and continues to make collaboration a priority. The bishop's task force expects to remain in place, assisted by the strong support of the bishop, its experiences of success, and a continued commitment to the Catholic mission.

The collaboration's partners are currently in the process of determining what its next "big project" will be. As one member said, "You keep the commitment by finding things that people are interested in doing." The task force continues to gather information about current and emerging needs in the community. Among the areas under consideration are housing; the enhancement of supportive services for existing transitional housing; and opportunities for the church to bring together the elements of parish life, health care, social services, and education into service for the community. □

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