

## THE MON VALLEY MISSION INITIATIVE

The Mon Valley was once a land of opportunity, with state-of-the-art factories, bustling towns, and vibrant neighborhoods. But with the collapse of the steel industry, it became a land of scarcity, marked by abandoned industrial sites, vacant storefronts, and dwindling populations. Many of the region's churches have closed their doors, and those that remain share a difficult reality: declining attendance, aging members, and unsustainable finances.

Though membership and money are real concerns for our parishes in the Mon Valley, they are symptomatic of larger issues plaguing the communities there, including unemployment, addiction, violence, and a pervading sense of hopelessness. The Mon Valley Mission Initiative aims to tackle these issues by reaching out to neighbors, listening to their needs, and engaging them in the development and delivery of substantive, long-term solutions.

While it is clear that there are no quick fixes, we have laid some important groundwork.

- *Community:* Where little interaction previously existed between our Mon Valley parishes, community has formed. Parish representatives study and pray together, share ideas and concerns, and encourage one another.
- *Awareness:* Participants have performed an honest assessment of the factors – both internal and external – that have contributed to their present difficulties.
- *Shifting perspectives:* Focus has begun to shift beyond internal concerns (membership, finances, buildings) to external concerns (the physical and spiritual needs of neighbors). They are learning to operate according to the abundance of God's blessings, rather than out of their (real or perceived) scarcity of resources.
- *Sense of God's mission:* While it is easy to rely on human instinct and intellect when making plans and solving problems, participants are learning to discern where God is already at work in the Mon Valley and to identify how they might join in that work.

Regular attendees at our Mon Valley Mission meetings include representatives from St. John's, Donora; St. Paul's, Monongahela; St. Stephen's, McKeesport; St. Matthew's, Homestead; Advent, Jeannette; Transfiguration, Clairton; and the Mid Mon Valley Lutheran Parish. They are joined by friends from other parts of the diocese who have taken an interest in the mission. Meetings typically include some combination of prayer, Bible study, small- and large-group discussion, and collaborative exercises. On occasion, we leave our meeting space to walk through the community, two by two, talking to and praying for neighbors. All are welcome to "taste and see." If you think this sort of collaborative approach might be helpful in your district/region, consider joining us for one of our upcoming meetings.

Please keep the Mon Valley Mission in your prayers in the year ahead.

In Christ,

The Rev. Dr. Canon Jay Geisler, Chaplain to the Mon Valley Mission Initiative  
Kimberly Karashin, Canon for Mission