WEAVING A NEW NET
A NEW APPROACH TOWARD JESUIT VOCATION PROMOTION IN THE USA

Report and Recommendations of the
Task Force on Vocation Promotion to the Jesuit Conference Board

Accepted and Approved by the Jesuit Conference Board, May 22, 2008

History

In July 2007, the Jesuit Conference board completed a set of agreements and commitments regarding the future direction of the United States Assistancy entitled Responding to the Call of Christ: A Renewed Way of Proceeding for Our Mission Today. In the section on “Jesuit Life,” the provincials recognized that “the changing realities of American culture, the Church, communications and attitudes toward commitment present a formidable challenge” to vocation development efforts and “affirmed that the responsibility for identifying potential candidates...rests with every community and every individual Jesuit.” To give direction for addressing this challenge and engaging all Jesuits and communities in supporting this work, the provincials agreed to form “a task force to propose comprehensive directions for a renewed and coordinated national effort that will report back to us by May 2008.” During the fall of 2007 a task force comprising 14 members -- lay and Jesuit, men and women, representing a broad range of perspective and disciplines -- was formed. The task force met and completed its mandate during a two and one-half day meeting in January 2008. The findings and recommendations of the task force were subsequently reviewed by the North American Vocation Directors group.

Research and Preparation

Prior to the meeting, members digested a briefing book containing a selection of current research, statistics and papers related to vocation promotion. At the meeting, the task force received a preliminary report from The Ulum Group, a public relations firm engaged by the vocation directors to review and make recommendations on marketing materials. It also received a report on thirty-five interviews conducted by the director of assistancy planning; those interviewed included vocation directors and others recommended by them.

1 A list of task force members is appended to this report.
Importance and Urgency

The importance and urgency of developing a comprehensive strategy for vocation development is attested to by: Fr. Kolvenbach’s remarks to the Jesuit Conference board in October 2006; the question asked by Fr. Nicolas on the eve of General Congregation 35; the attention given to vocation promotion in strategic discernment of the United States provincials; the concerns heard in thirty-five interviews regarding the lack of a coherent and consistent strategy for vocation promotion and the risks that this creates for our future; and the experience of members of the task force, who represent a broad range of perspectives and backgrounds. The task force is in strong agreement that the mission of the Society of Jesus in the United States and in our international commitments is at serious risk unless we take bold and creative action to address vocation development: unless there are people to do the mission – to be sent – there is no mission; and if there are no Jesuits to be partners with others in ministry, there is no partnership.

Findings

Based on the research and the personal and professional experience of its members, the task force has made the following findings upon which it bases its recommendations.

1. Relationships with Jesuits – individually and as a group; personally and professionally – are critical for vocation promotion.

The importance of relationships with Jesuits in opening the hearts and minds of young men to consider their lives in terms of vocation, and, for some, vocation to religious life and the Society of Jesus, cannot be underestimated.

- Critical to this is a one-to-one relationship with a trusted and trustworthy Jesuit, especially a Jesuit who is unafraid to raise the vocation question and to invite reflection, conversation and prayer.
- Positive exposure to Jesuits in the workplace and in religious community – even if from a distance -- is also critical; such positive exposure is characterized by Jesuits and communities who exhibit strong modeling & witnessing, warm hospitality,

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2 In his remarks to the provincials and their consultor-partners regarding the assistancy strategic discernment, Fr. Kolvenbach made a special point of saying that “the strategic planning will not function if there is not at the very same time a very strong promotion of vocations. If there is nobody more around, how can you plan strategically?”

3 In expressing his “Six Hopes” for the Congregation, Fr. Nicolas wrote: “The question for us is: Is it enough that we are happy with our life and are improving our service and ministry? Isn't there also an important factor in the perception of people (Vox Populi) that should drive us to some deeper reflection on religious life today? How come we elicit so much admiration and so little following?”
personal credibility, and words and actions that counter negative information about and stereotypes of the Society of Jesus.

- Also critical is exposure to Jesuits in settings explicitly designed to share Ignatian spirituality, especially regarding discernment.
- Recognizing the role that all Jesuits play in building positive relationships, it must be noted that relationships of potential candidates with younger Jesuits are particularly important.
- Further, research indicates that such exposure is most effective – but not exclusively so -- with young men who are practicing Catholics and involved in a faith community.

However, the task force notes the following barriers to the development of such relationships:

- For a variety of reasons, many Jesuits are hesitant to initiate and engage young men in vocation conversations.
- Many Jesuits are not sufficiently trained or explicitly supported for incorporating a vocation promotion ministry in their relationships with those they serve.
- Jesuit houses are not always hospitable and may not always give the best witness to those considering religious vocation.
- In relationships with young men, some Jesuits may misinterpret generational differences in piety and external devotions as rigid ideology, and may too quickly be dismissive of some young men.
- Our men are not always “strategically placed” in situations where such relationships are more likely to develop (a barrier that increases with the “diminishment” of Jesuit in many ministries).

2. Sharing of Ignatian Spirituality is critical.
   Of central importance in Ignatian Spirituality is the discernment of spirits so that one might respond in freedom to God’s will for the person. The sharing and training of young people in an Ignatian Spirituality that focuses on vocation discernment is the most important “tool” available to us for the promotion of vocations. Such discernment tools can be taught generally at any age and in any ministry in age-appropriate ways; it is never too early (or too late) to begin forming people in habits of discernment. At an appropriate age and in the proper circumstances, discernment may focus specifically on religious vocation. Several secondary schools and universities formally support discernment programs and groups, and vocation directors and promoters currently sponsor several such initiatives. There is strong anecdotal evidence that these are particularly effective for vocation promotion; certainly they are consistent with our mission. However, there is lacking a sufficient overall strategic approach and explicit commitment of resources (including the training and missioning of Jesuits) to this ministry.
3. **A positive image of the Society of Jesus and clear mission articulation are critical.**
Research indicates that young men who may consider a vocation to religious life are drawn by a deep desire to give their lives over to something tangibly positive:

- where they can make a difference;
- that speaks to their ideals and dreams;
- that asks of them commitment and sacrifice.

Though the Society of Jesus has such a positive image and a clear and compelling message for many who know us well, this is not true for all. Some young men who are considering religious vocation are hearing a different message. For these young men:

- The Society’s public image is too frequently determined and distorted by others;
- The mission of the Society is not always articulated in clear, consistent and compelling terms – even by Jesuits.
- The answer to the questions, “what compels me to give over my life; what is the sacrifice to which you are inviting me,” is not always apparent.

4. **Understanding and engaging dramatic generational shifts in models of communication, socialization and epistemology is critical.**
Our ability to build the relationships that are so critical to vocation development and provide the information necessary for vocation discernment is affected in important ways by the generational differences in these models.

- There have been dramatic changes in the communications channels that facilitate reaching and engaging potential candidates. Of particular note is the instantaneous nature of electronic communication (and the expectations that come from this); the greater customization and segmentation of communication; the enhancement of images (over words); the decreased “control” over what is communicated; and the increased “noise” created by the seemingly infinite number of communication sources competing for the person’s attention.
- Electronic communication has also had a dramatic affect on the socialization patterns of young people – where so much socialization takes place electronically through online social communities such as Facebook, specialized electronic interest groups, and individual text messaging. For young people, virtual relationships and communities can, in many important ways, be as powerful and compelling as some aspects of traditional face-to-face relationships and communities.
- Finally, there is evidence that skepticism of the written and spoken word, supported perhaps by the ubiquity of competing and contradictory electronic information sources and opinions, has resulted in an emphasis among young people on consistency between words and actions and tangible lived witness when making judgments about what is credible, valid and true.

While these paradigm changes challenge our traditional vocation promotion efforts, they also provide opportunities for shaping a renewed vocation promotion strategy if we choose to
work with (and even anticipate) these trends. Already, vocation directors and promoters are using new technologies for communication and social networking, but, again, we lack a coherent overall strategy for engaging and exploiting these tools.

5. **Research is critical.**
   Good research can help the Society develop sophisticated candidate profiles and better target its resources. The task force has two types of research in mind:
   - Research that collects and mines data on applicants to develop candidate profiles (much the same as the research done in virtually every university admissions office to develop applicant profiles).
   - Regular research on the effectiveness of various vocation promotion activities (not unlike the customer relationship management research routinely conducted by many businesses and non-profits).

Such research increases the probability of employing the right resources in the right ways and with the right people. Currently, the Society generally employs in-house research, rudimentary external research reports, and anecdotal information in making decisions about employing and directing resources.

6. **Institutional relationships and networks are critical.**
   The Society of Jesus is a religious order that expresses its charism and fulfills it mission in large part, though not exclusively, through institutions. A successful and vital ministry of vocation promotion will be weaved into these institutional relationships and networks:
   - Through a network of coordinated and age-appropriate discernment and vocation programs in schools, parishes and retreat centers;
   - In cooperative relationships with other religious orders and dioceses;
   - In providing forums for outreach to parents and families;
   - By leveraging the leadership of institutions to support a culture of vocation promotion.

Current institutional efforts, where they exist, are localized and generally not networked.

7. **Diversity in the Society’s membership is critical.**
   This Church in the United States is increasingly culturally diverse, but the Society of Jesus has not kept pace with this diversity in it membership. Unless the Holy Spirit has intentionally excluded or downplayed particular cultural communities in calling men to the Society, it appears that our current strategies for attracting and keeping men from diverse cultural backgrounds are insufficient, and therefore that our service to a culturally diverse Church in the United States may become (or already be) deficient.
8. *Structures are critical.*
Consistent and coordinated implementation of recommendations that address these findings will require structures and processes that reflect and support the goals. Though the current structure is characterized by dedicated, creative and hard-working staff, strong support from provincial leadership and sufficient financial resources, it is not a structure that can support the effective and forward-looking “renewed and coordinated national effort” called for by the provincials and necessary to meet the challenges ahead. In particular, there is inconsistency across provinces in role descriptions and reporting structures; there is sometimes unproductive tension between the role of vocation promotion and vocation accompaniment/assessment (internally when one man holds both jobs; and externally when province leadership has insufficiently defined the relationships and interactions between the various people who exercise these roles); and while those charged with vocation promotion have a high level agreement on mission and values, they differ, sometime significantly, in strategies to implement the mission.


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**Recommendations for a Renewed and Coordinated National Effort for Vocation Promotion for the United States Assistancy**

**Goal**
The task force recommends that Society take strategic action to create, sustain and strengthen a culture of vocation promotion in order to attract those candidates to the Society of Jesus whom the Spirit calls to the Society.

**Core Characteristics**
- The culture of vocation promotion permeates the Society of Jesus in the United States.
- It is created, sustained and strengthened by: clarity and consistency of message; effective structures and processes; and broad engagement of Jesuits and colleagues in relationships, partnerships and networks (both personal and institutional).
- Recognizing that vocation development is the work of the Spirit, it is a culture of intentional and deliberate cooperation with the Spirit that seeks to remove obstacles and enhance personal freedom to discern vocation through:
  - Good information, clear invitation, positive relationships and formation in discernment;
  - Unambiguous alignment of vocation promotion with our charism and mission.
Recommended Actions

1. **Clarify the Message**

   a. *Articulate a single contemporary message about the Society of Jesus and how it seeks to fulfill Christ’s mission that will inspire men from all backgrounds to give positive consideration to the Society in their vocation discernment.*

   The message will distill key features of historical and contemporary foundational and mission-related documents and translate these into a compelling and accessible statement for our place and time. It will prominently feature our faithful service to the Catholic Church and will speak to and be welcoming to a culturally diverse population.

   The task force recommends the following process and timetable for development and implementation through a responsible agent (perhaps a small task force).

   - Collect, review and distill the appropriate documents.
   - Solicit input from a sampling of men in formation.
   - Draft the message.
   - Evaluate and test the message for effectiveness with a diverse sampling of Catholic young men of high school, college and post-college ages.
   - Develop a strategy for the communication and use of this message in all vocation promotion materials and activities.
   - Develop a strategy for promoting the use of this message in all communications – formal and informal – involving Jesuits speaking about our mission.
   - Desired Target Dates
     - Draft statement completed by August 1, 2008
     - Evaluation completed by November 1, 2008
     - Deployment by January 1, 2009

   b. *Develop a coordinated and contemporary marketing strategy with emphasis on new media without neglecting traditional media*

   - Building on the more general message above and with a unified national voice, articulate a clear, consistent, authentic and specific *vocation promotion* message that potential candidates will find compelling and inspiring.
   - Deploy this message through a comprehensive, robust and integrated marketing plan that creatively and fearlessly engages the opportunities offered by generational shifts in models of communication and socialization, while not neglecting use of traditional media.
   - Educate and engage Jesuits in the effective use of these new media.
   - Evaluate the components of the marketing strategy on a regular basis.
c. *Face and address proactively challenges and obstacles to the Society’s image, especially regarding fidelity to the Church.*

- The task force recommends that communications offices in each province and nationally be strategic and assertive in presenting a positive image of the Society and countering negative images: take the lead here; do not let others define us.
- It further recommends that provincials address directly with individual Jesuits and Jesuit communities circumstances where patterns of behavior are contributing to a negative image of the Society.

2. **Involve Many Others in the Work of Vocation Promotion**

Involving many others in promoting vocations, and doing so effectively, will require changes in culture. Changing culture refers to changing the attitude of Jesuits and those who partner with us in ministry about their responsibility in the promotion of vocations. Jesuit provincials say over and over again that “everyone is responsible for promoting vocations,” but too few hear this or act upon it. The following steps will increase the likelihood that Jesuits and their colleagues in ministry will hear and act:

a. **Use the Annual Visitation**

Provincials intentionally include the question of vocation promotion in their annual visitations, calling to accountability the communities, works and individual members of the Society for their involvement in this effort.

b. **Creatively Engage Men in Formation**

Since exposure to relationships with younger Jesuits are particularly important for potential candidates, provincials call formators to plan creatively ways to make men in formation available for the work of promoting the Society over and above what is already expected.

c. **Affirm and Support Elder Jesuits**

Provincials affirm and support the important contribution made by elder Jesuits in giving witness and sharing wisdom, and explicitly call men to this ministry who are especially suited for it.

d. **Promote Healthy Communities**

Provincials call, challenge and hold accountable local communities to be welcoming and hospitable, to give visible witness to the evangelical counsels, and to open their homes to possible candidates who wish to explore Jesuit life more deeply in a supportive and open relationship. In this regard, the task force supports the recommendations of the Jesuit Life Commission.
e. **Build Institutional Relationships**

Because directors of Jesuit works and of affiliated organizations (e.g., JVC, CLC, SEEL, CHARIS) carry a special responsibility to incorporate a positive promotion of the Society in their apostolic mission and to support the efforts of vocation promoters within their institutions, the task force recommends that the provincial and his delegates develop strong and intentional institutional relationships in this area. Such relationships would be concerned with cultivating a culture of Ignatian discernment within the work and inviting collaborators to share with Jesuits responsibility for promoting the Society of Jesus and vocations to the Society.

f. **Mobilize Stakeholders**

The provincial and his delegates intentionally mobilize the energies and gifts of those who care about the Society (e.g., benefactors, alumni, family and friends) to support this work in explicit ways through prayer, words and action, as appropriate.

g. **Relate to Other Religious Communities and Dioceses**

The provincial and his delegates collaborate with other religious communities and dioceses in order to build positive relationships and networks, share ideas and programs, and expand promotion of the Society beyond our own “borders.”

h. **Promote Prayer**

In all of our communities and works, the provincial and his delegates emphasize and provide resources for ongoing prayer for vocations.

3. **Enhance Our Ability to Identify and Engage Candidates More Effectively**

   a. **Develop sophisticated candidate profiles through research.**
      i. Conduct formal research (e.g., regressions) to identify demographic and psychographic characteristics of the current and desired target audience.
      ii. Develop profiles of candidates, acknowledging the distinction between brother and priest candidates.
      iii. Use these profiles to direct resources and support programs.

   b. **Enhance the quality and quantity of contact between Jesuits and potential candidates.**
      i. Mobilize men in formation. Adjust the formation program to increase “face time” of novices, men in first studies and theologians with potential candidates (e.g., availability for special events and programs; a summer missioned to vocation promotion work, etc.)
      ii. Use vocation promotion potential as a criterion for making assignments. This is concerned not just with missioning a man to do vocation work, but is about selection of ministries in light of potential for vocation development in the ministry.
iii. Encourage and empower Jesuits to become involved in discernment groups, spiritual direction and programs in the Spiritual Exercises in our works; ensure that there is sufficient training and local support for this.

iv. Train Jesuits in skills of vocation promotion and hospitality; provide a “vocation promotion tool kit” to every Jesuit.

v. Emphasize with all the critical importance of creating a culture of vocation promotion, and their shared responsibility for its creation and maintenance.

c. Through historical study and current analysis, develop a contemporary understanding of what it means to be a Jesuit brother in order to: better engage and attract brother candidates; evaluate and develop an appropriate formation program; and educate Jesuits and partners on the life and vocation of Jesuit brothers.

4. **Embrace Diversity**

a. **Appoint a Task Force on Diversity in the Membership of the Society of Jesus**

   Through the course of the task force’s dialogue and exchange, it has become apparent to us that we need to address the compelling issue of diversity in the U.S. Church today and its relationship to vocation promotion. Diversity offers an opportunity for growth of the Society of Jesus, more accurately reflects the communities served, and provides a richness that supports leadership in the future. We believe there needs to be a strategic and intentional plan in place that appeals to men of diverse backgrounds. To that end, we urge that the Provincials convene without delay a national task force that reflects on the diversity of the Church and specifically addresses this issue of attracting a diverse group of men to the Society and providing appropriate formation that recognizes this diversity. The membership of the task force itself should reflect the diversity to which we aspire.

b. **Act on the recommendations of this task force.**

5. **Create Structures and Processes that Support the Strategies**

   Clarifying the message, involving many others in the work of vocation promotion, enhancing our ability to identify and engage candidates more effectively and embracing diversity are key components to creating a culture of vocation promotion. But we will fail to create that culture if we do not put in place structures and processes to support it. The task force recommends these structural initiatives:

   a. **Separate the functions of vocation accompaniment/assessment and vocation promotion, with distinct personnel assigned to these functions.**
b. See that vocation accompaniment/assessment continues to be a work of each province (or shared by two or more provinces regionally).
The person in each province holding this portfolio will have the title Assistant for Vocations. National coordination of and support for these assistants would now be the responsibility of the renamed Secretary for Formation and Vocation at the Jesuit Conference.

c. Create a strong assistancy level office for the Promotion of the Society of Jesus.
The person heading this office would lead and animate the national strategy and program outlined in these recommendations, and would convene regular meetings of local and regional promoters to coordinate implementation. This office will be accountable to the provincials through the Jesuit Conference board.

d. See that there is a network of province-level or regional Assistants for Promotion.
These assistants would be accountable to the local provincial(s) and would receive from them support and direction for local initiatives. However, their work would be coordinated by and consistent with the national strategy and program design. Job descriptions for these assistant would be consistent across the assistancy.

e. Desired Target Dates:
   - Agree on Structures: May 2008
   - Job Descriptions Completed: August 2008
   - Begin Putting Personnel in Place: January 2009

Conclusion

Knowing what the Holy Spirit has in mind for the membership of Society of Jesus in the United States in the future is far beyond the competency of this task force; we would not presume to even guess at the mind of the Holy Spirit. But we are convinced that Jesuits and their colleagues possess the resources and imagination to cooperate with the Holy Spirit much more effectively than we are now doing in promoting vocations – and that this is an urgent matter for us. Such effective cooperation will demand critical shifts and enhancements in our communications, our information, our internal culture and attitudes, our relationships and networks, and our structures… and will require strong leadership. The task force believes that implementing the recommendations in this report will go a long way to create these shifts and enhancements and bring about a culture of vocation promotion that will attract those candidates to the Society of Jesus whom the Spirit calls to the Society.
Vocation Promotion Task Force
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