



▲ The Very Rev. Michael Ruk, left, enjoys fellowship with the Rev. Barbara Kelley during a recent Bucks deanery meeting.

BUILDING COMMUNITY in Bucks Deanery

Distance is a fact of life in sprawling Bucks County, which encompasses 622 square miles. And that's especially true for clergy in the Bucks Deanery.

"We're the largest geographical and numerical deanery in the Diocese," says the Very Rev. Michael Ruk, rector of St. Philip's Episcopal Church in New Hope and Dean of the Bucks Deanery for the past four years. "It can take us 90 minutes from our southernmost parish, Andalusia, to get to Quakertown in the north."

Yet, 90 percent of Bucks Deanery clergy attend the monthly clericus meetings, where they gather to share the Eucharist, lunch, prayers, news, and ideas. The meetings are rotated among the deanery's 18 parishes.

"Sometimes it might be our next-door neighbor and sometimes it might be 60 minutes away," Ruk says. "It's important to move around. You basically get to see everyone's place in about a year and a half."

The clericus meetings address what Ruk calls "an important part of being a priest—building community."

"In this day and age, when there's less clergy, less staff, less resources, the more we can share, the more we're building up the body of Christ," Ruk says. "I think it creates a healthy clergy person, and also creates healthy parishes and a healthy diocese. I really believe that." ►



Finding An EPIC Solution

The sprawling Bucks Deanery can also make it challenging for individual parishes to build community and work together. So the deanery came up with an EPIC solution—a consortium of churches along the Rte. 202 corridor from New Hope to Doylestown in Central Bucks County. EPIC, short for Episcopal Partnership in Community, launched more than two years ago and is already making a difference in the area.

A good example of how it works is the Community PeaceMeal luncheon offered by EPIC at Trinity Buckingham the first Sunday of each month. It is the result of merging two previously existing feeding programs. For 27 years, Trinity Solebury and St. Philip's New Hope had the PeaceMeal program predominantly for people with HIV and AIDS, but the number of people being served dwindled in recent years. Meanwhile, Trinity Buckingham had a Community Lunch program that had plenty of clients in need,

but struggled getting enough volunteers.

"So we merged the two recently and now we're feeding about 80 people once a month," Ruk says. The "free and hearty" Sunday meal is provided to those in need of food or community, he says.

EPIC also launched a local Community of Hope International program based on the rule of St. Benedict, the 6th century monk and abbot who wrote about the basic monastic virtues of humility, silence, and obedience, as well as directives for daily living. The lay ministry provides pastoral care training. The local program was initially created by Deacon Matthew Simpson as his project for ordination.

In other examples, Trinity Solebury and Trinity Buckingham have joined together on youth ministry, while a Free the Girls program started at St. Philip's four years ago has now spread to almost every church in

the deanery. Free the Girls is a non-profit organization that collects new and gently used bras and distributes them to sex-trafficking survivors in Central America. The women who participate in the program operate small businesses selling bras in areas where the undergarments aren't widely available. This enables them to earn higher-than-average incomes—and achieve safe, stable lives for themselves and their families.

"Last year, we collected 2,400 bras," Ruk says. "Every year it seems to grow."

The success of the initial EPIC approach has led the Bucks Deanery, working closely with the diocese, to create "a Lower Bucks branch, which is those churches along Rte. 13," he says. "The new branch of EPIC will help to build their bonds, because most of them are smaller, and in a much more fragile place. We've been working on that for the last year." ▶



TOP LEFT, The Rev. Marlee Norton and the Rev. Lisa Keppeler listen intently during a deanery discussion.

TOP RIGHT, The Rev. Ernest Curtin joins the Rev. Daniel Moore and Norton in prayer.

BOTTOM RIGHT, Moore and John Connor, seminarian, talk during a break in the meeting.

Seeing the Breadth and Diversity of the Diocese

In much of Bucks County, Ruk says, “we’re far from the epicenter.

“I think one of the key things that’s the responsibility of all of us is to understand where everyone comes from,” Ruk says. “That’s why I think it’s really important the way Bishop Daniel is making sure that meetings rotate around to different places and deaneries and churches. I personally love that, because it allows us to see the breadth and diversity of the Diocese, from buildings to neighborhoods, versus just meeting at one central location. Which is a very small scope of what the diocese is about.

“It’s really good that people get out of their bubble. You see it’s not just a name, it’s a community. That is the way it’s building a tighter community and diocese.” ■

TOP, in sunshine or snow, members of the Bucks deanery gather to build community.
BOTTOM, Deacon Matt Simpson and Kelley share food and fellowship.

