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## THE CENTEREDGE PARISH EDUCATION PROJECT- DEVELOPMENT, EQUITY, AND WATERSHED PROTECTION IN CONNECTICUT

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*Connecticut is a small state without counties, just 169 contiguous towns and small cities, whose boundaries date from our colonial rural past. We have a population of just over 3 million, growing slowly. Although the population has increased only 12 percent in the last 30 years, the amount of urbanized land has doubled. With this sprawling residential and commercial development, we are among the 10 states that have lost the highest percentage of their rural land to development between 1982 and 1997. The social and geographic separation of the general population from minorities and the poor has increased, as the latter are left in the cities and older suburbs where affordable housing is concentrated. We are now the richest state per capita, but we have some of the very poorest and most racially segregated cities in the country.*

The ministries and outreach of the agencies and parishes of our four dioceses have long responded to the needs of the poor in our cities. We have done advocacy on a range of public policy and justice issues. Catholic Campaign for Human Development-funded groups have organized communities for self help. Yet, we struggle to help people understand that, while continuing the important works of charity, we must also work for justice by addressing the causes of poverty and inequity. How could we look beyond those town lines, beyond our identification as city or suburb, to see ourselves as living in regions connected by the economy and our shared environment? How could we recognize ourselves as true sisters and brothers to those lacking the resources and opportunities to raise their families successfully? How could we see the interconnections among the many social, economic, and environmental issues that must be addressed to achieve a just and sustainable future for all Connecticut's people? We needed a clearer vision of what the common good requires today.

To take up these challenges in a new way, the Office of Urban Affairs of the Archdiocese of Hartford created the CenterEdge Project. We commissioned a study of the patterns of development and social inequities in our state by Ameregis, a research organization led by Myron Orfield of Minnesota, which mapped a number of social and economic measures from publicly available data, including the 2000 census. The resulting *Connecticut Metropatterns* report, released in March, 2003, analyzes patterns and changes over time to show which communities are doing well, which are struggling, and where they might be heading if present

trends continue. The maps and analysis lead to the conclusion that certain changes would benefit many towns, not just the cities.

To bring the information in the report to the people of our state, we have created the CenterEdge Coalition, with nearly 50 partners. These faith communities, business and environmental groups, civil rights groups, planning organizations, housing and transportation advocates, civic groups, hospitals, an office of Yale University, and others, will use *Connecticut Metropatterns* as an educational tool for their constituencies. Bishop Peter Rosazza, auxiliary bishop of Hartford, heads this diverse coalition. We will follow this education project with advocacy for policy changes to bring about a more equitable, secure and sustainable future for all Connecticut's people.

To take some of this information to our parishes, we created the CenterEdge Parish Education Project. With the support and participation of the Connecticut Catholic Conference and the dioceses of Bridgeport, Norwich, and the Ukrainian Catholic Diocese of Stamford, we applied for and received a grant from the Cummings Foundation through the USCCB. To simplify the focus, we decided to look at the connections among issues of land use changes, water quality and watershed protection, equity and the common good. Rivers' watersheds are natural regions, connecting people and communities across boundaries of city and suburb, race and economic differences. This focus also offered a way to educate our parishioners about the issues right where they lived, and provided ways for them to take local, hands-on action with a variety of partner organizations. And, not least, water as a sacramental symbol offered rich possibilities for speaking to spirits and hearts, as well as minds.

Connecticut usually has adequate rain and groundwater, although we did start last summer with a drought. The state is bisected by the majestic Connecticut River, although no towns take drinking water from it. Our many smaller rivers and streams all drain, ultimately, into the Long Island Sound estuary. The metal and chemical industries that had poured wastes into our rivers, turning the waters different colors on different days, have long since closed or been cleaned up. Our waters are greatly cleaner than 50, or even 30, years ago, yet our Departments of Public Health and Environmental Protection have issued warnings that pregnant women should not eat fish from certain waters and some fish from Long Island Sound, due to mercury and PCB contamination. Our largest "agricultural" product is shellfish from the Sound, yet local fisheries are threatened by an oxygen-depleted "dead zone" which develops each summer, exacerbated by excess nitrogen from older sewage treatment plants and by polluted runoff from our increasingly urbanized landscape, including fertilizers from suburban lawns. This non-point source pollution is now the chief threat to our water quality and to a sustainable supply.

To develop our parish project, teams from the four dioceses learned and planned together. We visited pastors and worked with Parish Social Ministry leaders to recruit parishioners. We met with leaders of 15 river, watershed, and land trust organizations, as well as watershed coordinators and educators from the Department of Environmental Protection, one regional water company, and the Freshwater Institute of St. Joseph College. We hired United for a Fair Economy to train us in the principles of popular education.

In September and October of 2002, we held four conferences, each in a different major watershed. These gatherings, entitled "Let Justice Flow Down Like a River," were attended by 245 people from 75 parishes.

The three conferences in the Archdiocese of Hartford were offered in both English and Spanish. We began with prayer on themes of water and respecting life, gratitude and repentance, justice and stewardship. To engage participants, we asked how their lives and families were being affected by such “signs of the times” as water or air pollution, recent changes in the landscape where they lived, traffic congestion or difficulty getting to jobs. As people shared, first in pairs and then with the whole group, we heard concerns for increasing numbers of children with asthma. We heard from recent immigrants how they had experienced limited access to clean water in their homelands and their astonishment at how much we used and wasted. We heard people’s amazement at seeing once heavily polluted rivers cleaned up and supporting fish again.

Educators from the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension Service gave us a vivid PowerPoint presentation on the water cycle, the effects of more intensive development and impervious surfaces (buildings, roads, parking lots) on increasing stormwater runoff and decreasing recharge of rivers and aquifers, and the sources and effects of various pollutants. They showed specific examples of the practices towns, businesses, churches and homeowners were using to reduce such pollution and to protect water supplies and Long Island Sound. A member of our staff presented some of the Orfield maps, which illustrated recent geographical shifts in population, new housing, and jobs; school poverty increasing outside the cities; towns with new development lacking adequate tax base to deal with new schools, other infrastructure, and social needs; the concentration of waste processing facilities in the older cities: and more.

We then reflected on what we had heard in light of Catholic Social Teaching, led by Bishop Peter Rosazza and other presenters. The “signs of the times” indicated that, although some people and communities were prospering, many had inadequate resources and opportunities. They indicated that our lifestyles and current patterns of development were adversely affecting our air, water, land and health. Each presenter called us, as Catholics and citizens, to reflection and action in light of our values of respecting the human dignity and basic rights of each person created in God’s image, to responsibility for the common good, and to the preferential option for the poor. Solidarity with all our brothers and sisters required us to see and act beyond such humanly-constructed boundaries and categories as lines on a map, income level, racial or ethnic background, religion, or other ways we tend to divide and separate God’s people. Gathering by watersheds, we experienced our real, geographical connection to neighbors upstream and downstream through our shared water, air and land.

This complex and ever-changing environment, God’s creation and our only life-support system for all generations has been entrusted to our care and stewardship. Our speakers emphasized the teaching of Pope John Paul II and the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops on the inseparable link between care for creation and care of neighbor, especially in relation to environmental justice and the burden of pollution on minority and low-income communities in our cities. They reflected on St. Francis of Assisi’s description of Sister Water as “serviceable, humble, precious and clean,” and they challenged participants to say a brief prayer of thanks each time they used water. Realizing that we would not want to baptize an infant with water contaminated with pesticides, PCBs or oil, we were asked to consider what actions and policies might render our shared waters “unholy.” We were challenged to take responsibility and to work, with hope, for the time when greater justice would “flow down like a river” in Connecticut.

A number of workshops gave participants connections to local organizations for involvement and hands-on action. The Legislative Advocacy workshop featured the Action for Justice Network; the lobbying network of our four dioceses; and the director of Rivers Alliance of Connecticut, who discussed upcoming water protection legislation. Participants in the Empowerment workshop heard from organizations funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, which work for health care, community development and environmental justice. Parishes were invited to join in their work. The Direct Service and Justice Education workshops featured leaders of local river, watershed and land trust organizations, who described their water protection activities and how folks could join them for water stewardship work in their own communities.

Response was enthusiastic. Everyone felt that they had learned a lot and had gotten practical information to act on. Our goal was that participants would organize groups from their parishes to participate in a variety of fall activities with these local organizations, and much has been happening. People from 9 parishes joined in river walks, cleanups and an educational event with a water learning lab; Hispanic families helped tag migrating monarch butterflies at a shoreline nature preserve; and three enthusiastic women collected bugs from under rocks in a stream and identified them to determine water quality. A growing number of parishes are hosting educational events to share the conference presentations, and some have invited their town officials. One diocesan director shared information on a radio program. Bishop Rosazza has been featured in many news articles about the CenterEdge Project. Four CCHD-funded projects have held conferences or major education events in partnership with the Office of Urban Affairs and generated substantial news coverage. And, as our legislative session meets, we are doing advocacy work on a number of bills for aquifer protection and stormwater runoff, environmental justice provisions in state agencies' planning, smart growth planning, air pollution and diesel emissions reductions, as well as bills affecting health care, children, families, and other issues.

As spring comes, we will go to the banks of our flowing rivers with greater appreciation of the living and sacramental nature of our environmental commons and with new tools to work for greater equity. We ask God's blessing on all people in this lovely corner of God's creation.

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