HOME MISSION DIOCESES ARE AS DIVERSE AS THE PEOPLE THEY SERVE, BUT ALL SHARE THE CHALLENGE OF TRYING TO PROVIDE BASIC PASTORAL CARE TO THE FAITHFUL WHILE STRUGGLING WITH PRIEST SHORTAGES, PARISHIONER POVERTY, UNEMPLOYMENT, DIFFICULT OR ISOLATED TERRAIN, AND EVEN RELIGIOUS HOSTILITY. CATHOLIC HOME MISSIONS (CHM) OFFERS CRITICAL SUPPORT TO THE MEN AND WOMEN IN OUR COUNTRY WHO KEEP OUR FAITH ALIVE IN PLACES WHERE RESOURCES ARE STRETCHED TO THE EXTREME.

THREE DIOCESES ILLUSTRATE THE CREATIVE WAYS IN WHICH CHM GRANTS ARE USED TO SUPPORT EVANGELIZATION, RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, AND MINISTRY TRAINING.

THE DIOCESE OF SALT LAKE CITY encompasses the entire state of Utah, a largely rural area covering 85,000 square miles. Catholics represent less than 10% of the population, a figure that includes a growing number of Hispanic newcomers. Approximately 60% of Utahns belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), whose headquarters is located three blocks from the Catholic cathedral and pastoral center in Salt Lake City.

The LDS presence significantly influences many aspects of life in Utah. This lends urgency to the Catholic Church’s efforts to provide catechetical instruction, sacramental enrichment, social services, and community support.

Catholic parishes and missions are widely spaced and strategically located. There are resident pastors in 16 of Utah’s 29 counties. Nine other counties have mission churches with regularly scheduled Masses. Four counties have no visible Catholic presence, but Mass is occasionally offered in private homes. There are 13 parochial elementary schools and three high schools, which are strong tools for evangelization. The state does not have a single Catholic college or seminary, so recruitment and training of teachers for schools and religious education programs is a challenge. The high turnover rate of catechists and other parish ministers reflects the transient nature of Utah’s military or government employees.

The Diocese of Salt Lake City uses CHM grants for hispanic ministry, seminary education, diaconate training, and support of mission parishes. Within Utah’s growing Hispanic Catholic population, many people are poor and lack health care. They do not speak English well. Many have been displaced by immigration raids and require significant assistance from the local Catholic community. Many live in isolated mission areas yet have a fervent desire to practice their faith.

The diaconate program is strong and counts a number of Hispanics and men from rural areas among the 21 candidates ordained last year. CHM funds also help Catholics maintain a strong faith life through satellite training programs and cover travel costs for pastoral ministers to outlying regions.
Dear Friends,

Today, the United States has 88 mission dioceses, all in great need of financial assistance. These poorer and more rural dioceses represent approximately 45% of our dioceses here in the United States. Through our annual Catholic Home Missions Appeal, the Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops funds a wide range of essential pastoral activities, with special emphasis on evangelization; religious education; ministry training for priests, deacons, religious sisters, and lay people; youth ministry; and support for poor mission parishes.

Over the past 13 years, we have been able to allocate more than $125 million to help Catholic mission dioceses in poorer communities keep their doors open and to provide Mass, sacraments, and religious education for their parishioners. This issue of Neighbors highlights some of these dioceses. Through its grants, the subcommittee forms relationships, tying together Catholics in Utah and Texas with Catholics in Massachusetts and New Jersey. We are all one Church, just as the Church in the United States is one with the Church around the world.

We once again invite Catholics in America to help one another in prayerful generosity. Scheduled nationally for the weekend of April 30–May 1, 2011, the annual Catholic Home Missions Appeal provides needed funding for Catholics in Alaska, the Deep South, the Southwest, the Mountain West, and the young dioceses of the Caribbean and the Pacific. Please help us meet the challenge to strengthen the Church at home.

Most Rev. Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls–Billings
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions

Catholics are scarce in the East Texas Diocese of Tyler. They make up only 5% of the population in the heart of the Protestant-dominated Bible Belt, but they are represented in each of the 33 counties of the diocese.

In the past twenty years, the tally of parishes and missions has almost doubled, and the number of priests, seminarians, and deacons has increased to serve the growing population of Catholic faithful. But East Texas rivals Appalachia for the number of people living in poverty, and fully 25% of parishes in the Diocese of Tyler have annual incomes of less than $50,000.

The diocese itself has a serious budget shortfall and has eliminated employees and drawn on limited cash reserves to weather the economic downturn. Despite the lack of permanent staff in the vocations office, the Diocese of Tyler ordained three priests and two transitional deacons last year. There are two dozen seminarians and 34 candidates for the permanent diaconate. Ten women are discerning a call to consecrated life.

The blessing of robust vocations collided with financial reality and required the diocese to redirect five viable candidates to other seminaries, because it did not have the resources to support them. In recent years, the diocese has devoted 70% of its Bishop’s Annual Appeal funds to support seminarians. Still, collegiate seminarians and aspirants to the permanent diaconate are expected to pay a large portion of the cost of their own preparation.

The diocese has other commitments as well. In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Ike, the Diocese of Tyler established its first Catholic Charities program to help people displaced by the storms. It also developed comprehensive disaster preparedness plans for parishes to use in the future.

Hispanic households now compose more than half the Diocese of Tyler. Photo courtesy of Catholic East Texas.

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Hispanic households now comprise more than half the Diocese of Tyler, a figure that does not reflect the many people who are served by parishes and missions but do not register because of legal concerns. Many Hispanics hold jobs in the logging, poultry, and agriculture industries that have long attracted first-generation immigrants. Only 30% of diocesan priests are Hispanic, so Tyler is using CHM grants to expand its formation and vocation efforts with Hispanics.

With help from CHM, the financially strapped diocese continues to reach out to young men and women with a special invitation to consider priesthood and religious life. The vocations office also collaborates with parishes and other diocesan groups to educate people in their faith, increase awareness of holiness among the laity, and promote a deeper love and appreciation for liturgy and the sacraments.

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Geographically, the Military Archdiocese is the largest in the Church, because it has no actual territorial boundaries and literally spans the globe. It is responsible for meeting the pastoral needs of more than 1.5 million Catholics: servicemen and women on active duty and their families, students at military academies, patients in Veterans Administration medical centers, members of the Reserves and National Guard, and people working overseas for the federal government. The motto of the Military Archdiocese succinctly describes its mission: “To serve those who serve.”

The population of the military is similar to that of the United States as a whole in that approximately one-fourth of people identify themselves as Catholic. The vast majority of those served by the Military Archdiocese are 18-29 years old. The military has a higher concentration of Catholic young adults than any other workplace or institution. And the population is diverse, because the military is the single most integrated component of American society.

Uniformed personnel tend to be people on the move who stay only 2-3 years in an assignment. Many are from low-income families that are not well connected with social institutions outside the armed forces.

Military chaplains find many Catholics who know little about their faith or practice it infrequently. This makes the young adults susceptible to those who proselytize other religions. The Military Archdiocese uses Catholics Seeking Christ, an evangelization program that helps young military Catholics re-engage their faith, provides a social network of support and ongoing faith formation for practicing Catholics, and evangelizes non-Catholic service personnel. It also incorporates downloadable remote training resources that have increased participation and helped the archdiocese deal with staff reductions occasioned by budget cuts.

In challenge, there is opportunity: these young military personnel, who share the hopes, dreams, and cares of their generation, also face life’s deepest questions about purpose, existence, and death. As a result, they are often excellent candidates for the priesthood or a religious vocation.

The Military Archdiocese uses CHM grants to support a wildly successful vocations program, which now has thirty seminarians. Students are co-sponsored by the Military Archdiocese and another participating diocese, both of which share their seminarian training. After ordination, the new priest is guaranteed an option to serve a full career on active duty in the armed forces as a military chaplain after three years of pastoral experience in the co-sponsoring diocese.

Currently, there are only 285 priests serving 250,000 Catholic men and women on active duty and their 737,000 family members. This approach is an innovative way to relieve priest shortages at home and in the military.

More than ever, CHM grants to these and other dioceses help sustain and enrich the faith of Catholics in underserved areas.
Home mission dioceses are as diverse as the people they serve, but all share the challenge of trying to provide basic pastoral care to the faithful. Read about three dioceses that demonstrate the creative ways in which Catholic Home Missions grants are used to support evangelization, religious education, and ministry training.

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THE CATHOLIC HOME MISSIONS APPEAL will be taken up in most dioceses April 30–May 1. CHM has allocated over $125 million to mission dioceses since its beginning in 1998.