

THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE USA PROVINCE

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The year 2016 will mark the 200th anniversary of the first Vincentian missionaries to set foot in the United States in Baltimore, Maryland. They came in response to the invitation of American missionary bishops in the territory of upper Louisiana. After a short stay in Baltimore they eventually reached the heartland of America by wagon, flatboat and horseback.

The increasing number of Vincentians arriving from Europe led to the founding of an American Province in 1835. The growth in vocations to the congregation and the challenges of administering the sprawling territory of the province eventually led to the split of the province in 1881. The Eastern Province, headquartered at Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, assumed, in general, the states east of the Mississippi River, while the Western Province, headquartered in Perryville, Missouri, had the western states.

Then in 1958 the Western Province once again divided to address the rapid growth of the mission and to more effectively administer the mission. In this division the Western Province was subdivided into one province and two vice-provinces. The province was now called the Midwest Province and was headquartered in St. Louis. The two vice-provinces were the South and West, headquartered in Dallas, Texas and Los Angeles, California. Then in 1975 the two vice-provinces became full provinces. In that same year the vice-province of the province of Poland that was established in 1920 was also made a full province, the New England Province. So in 1975 there were five provinces of Vincentians serving in the United States.

On January 25, 2010 the Congregation of the Mission in the United States once again was reorganized or reconfigured to address the reality that was facing it in the United States. Because of steady decline of vocations to the Congregation the three Western Provinces (the Midwest, West and South) of the United States chose to reorganize themselves as the Western Province. This decision was made because of the declining numbers of Vincentians, but also because it was believed that this new configuration might help us continue the mission of the congregation in the States.

The decision to reconfigure the three Western Province did not happen overnight. I am aware that this topic has been in discussion for at least 20 years. In the late 1980's the Southern Province and the Western Province had established a joint committee to explore the possibility of the merger of the two provinces. I served on that committee. However the work of the committee came to an end with the change of provincial leadership of one of the provinces before any type of reconfiguration could occur. In the early 1990 another effort to move the issue forward to reconfigure came from the Superior General. With this initiative all five provinces were asked to consider the topic. This effort also failed when the committee asked to shepherd the project was unable to achieve a consensus among all the confreres of the five provinces on what shape the reconfiguration should take. Even though this process did not result in a consensus on reconfiguration, it did help identify that there was a strong interest among many of the confreres for some type of reconfiguration. In the end the Superior General recommended that those provinces who were interested in reconfiguration pursue the topic among themselves.

In the later years of the 1990's the Provinces of the South and West, at the strong urging of their provincial assemblies, began to discuss the prospects of reconfiguration. The provincials of the two provinces organized joint meetings of the two provincial councils to discuss the topic. As a result of these meeting a commitment was made to work more collaboratively and to continue the discussion on reconfiguration. The collaboration included: where possible establish single committees (formation, vocation, ongoing formation, etc.) composed of confreres from both provinces to serve both provinces. One confrere served as treasurer and vocation director for both provinces. We also began drafting new policies that both provinces could adopt (formation, vocation, sabbatical). We began sharing personnel across provincial lines more easily and developed protocols to facilitate these increased sharing.

The South and the West began merging before the final decision to merge came about. While the South and West were well on their way to merging the provincial of the Midwest Province, at the strong urging of his provincial assembly, asked to be included in the discussion. In fact the Midwest Provincial did more than ask to be included in the discussion, he proposed that the three provincials, after receiving a resolution from their provincial assemblies, commit to a timeframe for reconfiguration. In 2007 the three provincials decided on a date in January of 2010 for the reconfiguration of the province to happen. The three years leading up to the reconfi-

guration date would be used to make all necessary preparation to turn over to the new provincial a fully functioning province in January 2010.

Summary thoughts of Reconfiguration of the Western Province

1. It would not have happened if the confreres of the province did not want it to happen. Confreres need a forum to openly discuss the pros and cons of this issues. They need to be able to freely say what they want about this issue and listen to each other. In the end if the confreres do not want it, I do not think it should happened.

2. Provincial leadership is critical. Provincials cannot force confreres to ask for reconfiguration, but they can allow and encourage the discussion to occur. They can stop it from happening. In our experience when one provincial did not want it to happen the process ended.

3. I think it is easier for the confreres to accept reconfiguration with another province when they have already had some earlier (good) experiences of collaboration and working with the other provinces — when there have already been opportunities to establish or (in the case of our three provinces) re-establish relationships.

4. I believe there needs to be a compelling reason for reconfiguration. Our reason was we thought this was the best way for us to continue the mission of the Congregation in the United States in the future. Our reason was the mission. The mission must determine the best configuration we need for the 21st century.