Smack in the middle of his mid-40s, David still starts the baseball season with the mental stamina of a nine-year-old running out onto the field for his first practice. The physical stamina lurches a few yards behind, less lean and mean now having consumed, or rather been consumed, by the aging additives of mid-bulge, mid-ache, and mid-pain. But he loves the sport. And so does Mark the nine-year-old now running ahead of the hero-Dad that he previously trailed behind.

So to find the two of them in a fabric store on a Saturday afternoon in April was to move outside the box, or more aptly put, outside the diamond. But being the good sports that they are, they accompanied wife and mother in her swirl of excitement to match wallpaper, drapery material, window treatments, and all the other thrills and frills for putting the finishing touches on the newly appointed study.

David was getting into it. He was expanding his worldview from sports, couch, and television to interior decorating, aisles, and fabric samples. “Honey, what do you think of this?” he asked, holding up a swatch of material. The sales clerk, or design consultant, or whatever she is called, in a rather bold reaction rolls her eyes as if to say “Is he for real?” Marybeth, David’s wife smiles, while looking over to see if David is miffed by this woman’s unchecked criticism.

Undeterred, David continues his participation in this game of which he is familiar with neither the rules nor the plays. A few minutes later he approaches with another sample of color and design. The clerk now takes a swing and hits a verbal insult out of the park. “Is he color blind?” Attempts at humor run around the circle.

David lumbers back to Mark who has sat dug out in a space of sheer boredom. Father says to son with an air of feigned exasperation, “No one listens to me.”

Mark looks up, nods his head, and says slowly and deliberately, “Welcome to my world, Dad.”

Father and son pause and smile as they run past the clerk, the wife and mother with a wave, the front display window, and out the door, sliding into the car with its radio and afternoon Red Sox game.

Worlds can be small and isolating. Organizations are often comprised of worlds that are frankly, worlds apart. So often organizations are
viewed more like solar systems with individual planets orbiting round and round, rather than seen in the context of the wider universe.

And this is true of one of the world’s largest organizations, our Church, our *universal* Church. And of course, that universe gives way to a universe of Christianity, and that gives way to a universe of Judeo-Christianity, and that gives way to a universe of theists, and so forth.

But to focus, for now, on our Church, even our Church here in the United States, even further, pastoral care in our Church in the United States, we recognize that in some ways we are worlds apart. That is why we have a unique opportunity this fall with the symposia around the country to bring many worlds together: the worlds of bishops and dioceses, the worlds of chaplains and health care institutions, the worlds of pastors and parishes.

How to bring these worlds together? The symposium title itself, *Comprehensive Spiritual Care for Our Sick and Dying: A National Pastoral Strategy*, carries the question and the answer. Our sick and dying are why we need to come together. The bishop, pastor, chaplain (and by extension the diocesan administrators, parish staff, pastoral volunteers, Eucharistic ministers, ministers of care, CPE supervisors, etc.) all have one focus, the sick or dying person who depending upon location is a parishioner, patient, client. The question of how we offer comprehensive spiritual care finds an answer in systemic change—a national pastoral strategy.

I offer that there are three essential components that need consistent attention for us to succeed in moving us as Church together in one world of pastoral care ministry. Quite simply, they are planning, participation, and prayer.

First, there is planning, and we have been planning since the closing hours of the Baltimore symposium. Within a month, we met with our Episcopal Advisory Council in Atlanta at the bishops’ June meeting. In July, each Episcopal Advisor personally signed a letter to all the bishops in their respective USCCB regions announcing the dates and places for the symposia. In January, all the bishops received an invitation and preliminary outline of the symposia with response forms asking for their participation and the names of persons in the diocese (diocesan health care administrators and parish priests). These invitations were all personally signed by myself along with an accompanying note.

At this writing, close to 30 bishops have accepted our invitation to come to one of the symposia, and I anticipate several more will be
coming.

The Symposium Planning Committee, with the leadership of Susanne Chawszczewski, NACC Director of Education, is moving forward with the curriculum, liturgy planning, and local onsite planning committees. For purposes of uniformity and consistency, we will be utilizing the medium of video presentations, including an opening presentation of highlights from the Baltimore symposium. We will soon be gathering “best practice” models from you to incorporate in this process of strategizing for the future.

We are looking to have a significant resource center at each of the symposia with such support as healing music for ritual (we are negotiating with Peter Rubalcava who wrote several beautiful songs for the Baltimore symposium toward cutting a CD for this event), making available the Church’s ritual for Pastoral Care of the Sick (the focus for at least two of the presentations), and the anticipated availability, in book form, of the material from Baltimore in *Recovering the Riches of Anointing: The Sacrament of the Sick*, published by Liturgical Press.

The symposia are actually anticipated as time for gathering data and plotting strategy with an ultimate goal of drafting a national pastoral plan to go to the body of bishops for discussion and vote. As you may know, this is the medium of the bishops’ conference these days. The last few years the bishops have been approving “pastoral plans” that are short, succinct, and concrete, unlike the “pastoral letters” of the past. Last November, for example, the bishops passed a pastoral plan for pro-life activities.

Planning also entails significant work in grant proposals for monies to support this ambitious effort. We are currently in the process of writing grants (one has been submitted). Consultants and experts in the field of development have told us that the scope of this plan, especially with the identification of concrete outcomes for the pastoral care ministry in this country, could be of great interest to a number of potential foundations.

Thus, the planning continues in further refining the goals and objectives that we have laid out for these symposia.

Second, there is the obvious need for participation by those whose worlds are pastoral care in the Church. Thus, the strong continuing efforts to have our bishops present with us. Likewise, we have lists (from the bishops) of priests, diocesan officials, and others to whom we will send out a registration packet. We will also invite health care leaders from systems around the country to consider participation.
Our plan is to list all the symposia sites and bishop participants in one registration packet, thus enabling all potential registrants to see firsthand the scope of this endeavor.

Obviously, we want to encourage the participation of as many of our chaplains and CPE supervisors as possible. In specifying measures for one of the grant proposals, we indicated that we would be successful if we had the participation of 30 percent of the membership (approximately 1,200 members). In that same proposal we indicated that we would be successful if we have 10 percent of the bishops present (approximately 30). It would be great to exceed both numbers.

We invite you to look ahead and plan now to attend one of the eight symposia. We will be sending out notification to those chaplains and CPE supervisors whose bishops have accepted our invitation to participate as we get the positive responses. One of the components of the bishops’ part in the conference (we have them present less than 24 hours) is an opportunity for the bishop to gather separately with the chaplains in his diocese for a box lunch meeting.

Finally, there is the equally obvious need for prayer. If this is of God, it will be successful. But we do need to know that we are truly most at home in ourselves, personally and professionally, when we are at and in prayer.

At the end of all my graduate work in spiritual direction, I came away with the concrete knowledge of only a couple of words. One of them is “noticing.” I believe “noticing” is what St. Paul described as “praying unceasingly.” When you and I “notice” God, we are in God’s presence, we are communicating with God.

The most useful workshop I ever attended was in Chicago at an NACC event many years ago. The woman presenter said the following: “God tries to reveal the God self to us probably 30 times a day.” In other words God is trying to communicate to us and with us 30 times a day. She went on to say, “We probably catch God’s revelation once every three months.” What statistics! Thirty times a day, once every three months!

I share this because I also believe that there are no “coincidences,” only “God incidents.” Noticing does that to you.

And so I noticed something one day last January when I sat in the office of Msgr. James Moroney, the Executive Director of the Bishops Committee on the Liturgy. In discussing the Baltimore symposium and the plans for the follow-up symposia, we got quite
excited about the content and the process that we were developing. He asked what I later realized was a key question: What’s your next step after these symposia? I shared that the question was asked during a recent conference call of the Planning Committee and our response was that somehow the next step seems to be implementation of our findings at the diocesan level. He was the one who then asked if we ever considered using these symposia as a platform for writing a national pastoral plan for possible consideration by the full body of bishops.

How might the wind of God, the holy wind of God, the Holy Spirit of God be moving in these unexpected moments? One simply notices. And I think upon reflection one asks is this perhaps a God incident?

*Comprehensive Spiritual Care for Our Sick and Dying: A National Pastoral Strategy* is not just any NACC event. In fact, this year we have marshaled our resources—including you, the most valuable—to support the opportunity to continue to be carried by the winds of Baltimore. That’s not a light decision, or maybe it is. ✶