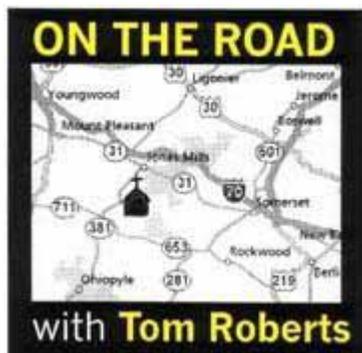


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Myers, da Cunha discuss problems, promise of Newark

by Tom Roberts



The Archdiocese of Newark, like many other sees, is going through a period of transition and reorganization. Financial problems, demographic shifts and continuous waves of new immigrants create particular problems as well as opportunity for the church in Newark.

Archbishop John J. Myers and Auxiliary Bishop Edgar da Cunha discussed these and other issues confronting the archdiocese during a nearly hour long interview May 7 at the archdiocesan offices. Sitting in also was James Goodness, director of communications for the archdiocese.

Following is an edited version of the exchange.

NCR: Looking at these broad trends across the country, including demographic shifts and the rest, are there new models emerging, both in terms of ministry, lay involvement and that kind of thing? Discuss the process you've been going through here that has involved a lot of collaboration as I understand it. The church isn't what it was 40 years ago. Where are we in that?



Archbishop Myers: Well, first of all, I'm very impressed and

grateful for the presbyterate here. It's a very highly educated, very sophisticated and good-hearted presbyterate. Bishop da Cunha can correct me on this, but one of the things that struck me in contrast with Central Illinois where I was priest and Bishop for 35 years is that the ethnic mix of the archdiocese is very rich. I always want to be, and I think we have been, welcoming about that.

In one parish, we might have three different ethnic communities being ministered to, and sometimes with priests from three different continents serving them. So they have to learn to live together. Time doesn't mean the same thing. They don't like the same food. They think of parish life differently. Somehow, they have to work it out. This is one of the first impressions which I had, and that can change within a five-year period. The same parish might have a different ethnic mix five years from now.

NCR: So, that's different from the 1920s or 1930s?

Archbishop Myers: Absolutely.

NCR: The people then would arrive, they would build their Church. That would be their community and that was it. They had their own priests.

Archbishop Myers: That's right.

NCR: There are immigrant ways today, but they're different?

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Archbishop Myers: It's different. That's exactly right, and it's more flexible. Bishop, what do you think?



Bishop da Cunha: I'll say a couple of things we can foresee

happening. One is we're no longer going to have the ethnic churches and national churches as we used to have. The Polish church here, the Italian church here, and the German church here. So now we have more integration. We have a parish that has Mass in Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, English and Korean.

tThat's one thing. Many of the priests are from other countries. We do have a large ordination, but we do have priests from other countries, and those who are seminarians have many from other countries. I think that integration brings the new dimension to the Church. We have also seen, and we are working towards people seeing a wider view of Church rather than my little world here. My parish is my little world and we are self-contained here.

tWe are trying to help people look beyond that parochial vision of it's just my parish. Leave me alone with it. We have people exchanging ministries and parishes exchanging ministries, reaching out to others. Suburban parishes are reaching out to inner city parishes, and inner city parishes are sharing ministries with other suburban parishes. There is that view of the Church as more than just a small cluster of a parish.

Archbishop Myers:tOne of the ways that I say it is that the Lord said, "Go and carry the Gospel to all nations." All the nations came to us. We get to learn to live with that.

NCR:tIt's amazing. I've only been in a few parishes in a couple of days. In one of them, five people employed there are from five different countries, and they're first generation. I've met priests from Uganda and from Southern Spain.

Archbishop Myers:tThey're from Haiti, and many Latin American countries. We have that and plus we're generous with our priests. I think Archbishop Broglio told me we have the largest number of priests in the military. Plus I have over 30 priests in missionary work around the country and around the world. We have the Neocatecumenal Missionary Seminary. They are priests of the archdiocese, but approximately 50 percent of them work outside the archdiocese.

NCR:tEmerging models involve, as I read it, two underlying forces that are at work, and one is the theory of lay participation.

Archbishop Myers:tWe are very much in favor of that. The model which we eventually chose we called New Energies as it applies to parishes. The notion there is that the New Energies team that Bishop da Cunha has headed, and he knows more detail than I do, is that we would designate two or three parishes to dialog and move towards mergers, partnerships or linkages.

NCR:tI am trying to figure out the distinctions, but I think I'm getting it.

Archbishop Myers:tThe bishop [da Cunha] would be the best one. We had not just the clergy and the parish staff, but representatives of each parish to be involved in the dialog because we wanted their ideas and their input. In fact, we often change our original plans after getting their input. The bishop can spell that out in more detail.

NCR:tWhat I'm hearing in parishes is that you've been very patient about this process.

Archbishop Myers:tIt's been five years so far. It started in 2002. What I think by my instinct is that people need time to change and deal with change. Rather than cram it down their throats all of a sudden, I'd rather take the time and let them feel some ownership and let their ideas really have some effect on the process. The team and Bishop da Cunha have been very good at that. I guess I'm patient. I don't know. Some days I'm patient.

NCR: These processes are going on all over the country and some are giving mandates that certain areas have to go from seven parishes to five here or five to four there. The process I heard here is that there is an enormous amount of discussion still going on without mandates.

Bishop da Cunha: Yes, and it continues. We wanted people to be part of the process because if we would just tell them Parish A and Parish B are going to merge or link and tell them what to do, we know there is going to be more resistance. We don't pretend to hold all the knowledge and truth. We need to get their input for their sake and our sake, too. That is what we started.

tWe make an evaluation of the parish and then we make a recommendation. We tell them, 'This is what we suggest: either that you link, merge or partner.' We give them a time, and tell them, 'Now you analyze that recommendation and respond.'

Archbishop Myers: And you give them a date.

Bishop da Cunha: Right, we ask them to respond by such-and-such a date. Sometimes, they respond and say, 'We agree with your recommendation.' Other times, they will come back and say, 'We do not agree with your recommendation,' but we always tell them, 'If you don't agree with our recommendation, come up with an alternative. Don't just tell us, 'We don't agree with your recommendation. Leave us alone.' That's not good enough for us.'

tThen they come back sometimes with a different recommendation. We analyze their response then. If we agree with their alternatives, then we base the decision on that. If we don't, then we make another recommendation, go back to them and keep up the dialog until we come up with some kind of agreement. When we come up with that agreement, we give it to them.

tIn the most difficult cases, which are the mergers, that is when people resist the most. We've been doing it kind of one step at a time. So the first step is we ask them to enter into a partnership. Parish A and Parish B start sharing some ministry partnership. Then, after six months or a year, then we say, 'Now, we want to make you linked. Two parishes will have one pastor and combine some administration.'

tWe give them a year or two for that language. After that period, we evaluate that linkage again and say, 'Now, it's time to merge.' So we're going to canonically make one parish, but we will still keep the two churches open. So that people have a sense of the continuity of their church, we keep the two churches. So we call it merged with two sites.

tThen we give them another amount of time, a year or whatever time we deem for the evaluation of the two sites. Then after that time, now they have come a long way of working together. They are used to sharing ministries, a pastor, one name and one parish. Now they may eventually be able to share one building and bring everything together. By doing that, we find that we lessen their resistance.

Archbishop Myers: That doesn't mean that some people aren't hurt or upset, but it's less. We've had very few headlines, and the team has been very good. We started with a different group, but now we have our own, trained facilitators.

Bishop da Cunha: Consultants, right.

Archbishop Myers: We have the facilitators and consultants, so they are able to help people talk to one another and have meetings which have difficulties, but which we have people trained to help them through.

NCR: The other force at work in this is necessity. In your case, you're not driven by a priest crisis, but in many places, it is.

Archbishop Myers: We're driven by the financial.

NCR: I'm hearing that in many places. Archdioceses and dioceses are giving up ministries that I never thought they'd have to give up because of the money. How is that tight money situation, exacerbated by the economic downturn, changing the presence of the church?

Archbishop Myers: First of all, built into our Archbishop's Annual Appeal we make provision for it. Originally, it was like four million dollars that we gave to inner city parishes and two million of it went to inner city schools. We're cutting back somewhat on that, but not dramatically at this point, but we try to tell people, "We're supporting you during this transition but it can't go on forever."

People understand that it can't go on forever so the archdiocese has been in a position to help them financially. Not in all cases, but in many. We've been very generous. I think there is probably a tradition of that around the archdiocese. We're trying to eliminate the category of regular subsidies so they know this is not something that they can count on forever.

NCR: So even when you're partnering and linking, getting to the point of merger, you're still having to keep two buildings heated, cooled, maintained.

Bishop da Cunha: Yes, we still have to do that.

Archbishop Myers: After a while, it dawns on the lay people that this doesn't make sense.

Bishop da Cunha: Yes, exactly. Then we tell them in their evaluation, "Tell us how much it costs you to keep the two churches? How much was the income when it was two parishes and how much is it now that it's one parish? How much is it costing you to keep the two buildings and how much would it cost if you were to consolidate in one building?"

Once they read those numbers, they're going to say, "Well, that makes sense." Finance is not the only motivation for us. People have said in some cases, "It's all about money," but it really isn't because we have many situations which have parishes that are not in financial trouble, and yet, we ask them to merge because of demographics or closeness to other parishes.

They are too close to each other and the people who originally were part of the parish have moved out and they have too few people. They have 200 people in this church, and then 115 in the other, and they are so close to each other. It makes sense to bring them together and form a stronger community because then they can do some form of ministry together that they couldn't do as individuals that were separated.

Archbishop Myers: If I could underscore that, Tom, we started out in 2003. The working group came up with 13 principles, I think, for evaluation of parish life. After our first round of consultation with the parishes, we changed it and expanded it at their suggestion. In 2005, we came up with 28 principles of evaluation of parish life.

James Goodness: The numbers we first put together really had to do with sacramental issues. You take a look at a particular community, how many births and baptisms were occurring, how many children were involved in religious education programs, how many weddings were going on, and everything across the board. You started seeing a pattern.

Where there were financial problems were the places where you would have only a few births and baptisms in a year. You'd have a couple of weddings, but you're going to have a massive number of

funerals. You weren't seeing a natural turnover of life were new generations would come and take on the life of the parish. Once people began to see that, they said, 'Now we understand why there's a problem because nobody's coming to Church. There aren't people coming to the neighborhood anymore.'

Archbishop Myers: 'The neighborhood has changed.'

NCR: 'Let me ask you, are we headed to a Church that is perhaps a lot less territorial in terms of the boundaries of the parish and a lot more mission driven or culture driven?'

Bishop da Cunha: 'The territory today doesn't mean a whole lot for people as it used to mean. People go to Church where they feel comfortable, where they want, where the language works or whatever. If you told people 50 years ago, 'I come from Brooklyn,' they'd say, 'What parish?' That was what people identified with.'

NCR: 'You didn't go to St. Peter's if you went to St. Aloysius.'

Archbishop Myers: 'It's not that way anymore. By and large, it's not that way.'

Bishop da Cunha: 'If you ask people, 'Where do you live?' they'll say, 'I live in Hoboken, but I go to Mass in Weehawken,' or, 'I live in Bloomfield, but I go to Mass in Nutley.' This has been all over the place so boundaries are really becoming less and less significant for people.'

NCR: 'You don't try to enforce boundaries because you can't.'

Archbishop Myers: 'We just couldn't possibly do it.'

NCR: 'It's amazing how attached people are to their parishes and how much anger and other emotions are expressed when they are closed. The deepest sadness I experienced in another diocese was when I was talking to African-Americans whose churches were being closed. Your stats tell me that the black population is 20 percent and that includes African-Americans and Africans who aren't Americans.'

Archbishop Myers: 'In fact, if you look at our statistics, more of our black people come from African than from the United States.'

NCR: 'Members?'

Archbishop Myers: 'Members.'

NCR: 'Now, I understand that, but in the city, what is the African-American population percentage in Newark inside the city? Do you know that?'

Archbishop Myers: 'I don't know that.'

Goodness: 'Well, it's over 50 percent'

Bishop da Cunha: 'It is very high.'

Archbishop Myers: 'I'm not sure of that. I think I just heard that with Latinos, it's about a third and a third blacks. There is actually a power shift occurring.'

Bishop da Cunha: 'There are a lot of African Americans in the Protestant churches in Newark.'

NCR: Is there a significant outreach from the archdiocese to African-Americans? I presume there is to Hispanics.

Archbishop Myers: Yes, we have a Hispanic affairs office and we have an office for African-American Affairs.

Bishop da Cunha: And we have many parishes that have no African-Americans. We have some parishes that have a combination of Africans and African-Americans. We have some parishes that are mostly African-Americans. We have some that are mostly Africans.

Archbishop Myers: Usually Ibo, from Nigeria.

Bishop da Cunha: We have a parish that is mostly Ghanaians. We have a parish that is mostly Nigerian. They have Mass in Ibo.

Bishop da Cunha: We do have one parish that is kind of the mostly traditional and historical black parish in the archdiocese because Martin Luther King Jr. was there. That parish has very few people left, so it's barely surviving. We don't know how long that's going to survive because it just doesn't have that many people in it any more.

Archbishop Myers: One of the things that I really treasure is that even in Bergen County, which is our wealthiest county, I go to practically no church where it isn't an integrated congregation. We just don't have lily white congregations. We have some that are more heavily dominated with Anglos, but the area is a true melting pot, which I guess isn't a word any more.

Goodness: It's an economic fact that when the ethnic groups start making money and getting established, they move to areas where there is a higher income.

Archbishop Myers: And the better schools for the kids.

NCR: Immigration must be an enormous issue on the plate here.

Archbishop Myers: Well, we have an office in Catholic Charities, simply to help people with immigration issues and we give a lot of energy to that. At that same time, we don't ask people if they have papers or not. Our services are not dependent on that either way. In fact, I try to create an atmosphere of welcome. We want you. We welcome you. We want you to be one with us. We want to serve you and help you serve your family and friends.

NCR: I spent some hours yesterday with Father Bill Reilly.

Archbishop Myers: Yes, he's the coordinator for immigration. He's wonderful.

NCR: I would assume that the activity and advocacy is actually in the direction of helping immigrants.

Archbishop Myers: Sure. Absolutely.

NCR: Is there much conversation you have with government people here?

Archbishop Myers: The mayor, Cory Booker, is in favor of immigration. Two nights ago the governor [Jon Corzine] was at our gala for Catholic Charities, and he is an Illinois boy, by the way. Corzine is from the University of Illinois. We're both Illinois farm boys. We do cooperate with the government. We have

established the first center to aid victims of human trafficking, which we have in our Catholic Charities.

Goodness: tI understand that was cut.

Archbishop Myers:tIt was because we weren't getting grants any more, so you're right.

NCR:tYou just don't have the money?

Archbishop Myers:tWell, that's part of our problem.

Goodness: tWell, even at that, we joke about the state of New Jersey working with us. We are the largest state agency.

Archbishop Myers:tOther than the state itself. We have eleven shelters and we do the state's job and the county's job, and we're the only one among the people doing this who don't separate mothers and children. Most turn them over to DYFS [Department of Youth and Family Services], which is the state care for children, and we don't separate mothers and children.

NCR:tIn what kind of cases?

Archbishop Myers:tHomeless people. We also have HIV Aids shelters and all that stuff. You name it, we have it. We are struggling with Catholic Charities, but we are just about back to the break even point, although we give a million and a half a year.

NCR:tThe other funding comes obviously from?

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Archbishop Myers:tFederal and state government?a reimbursement.

NCR:tBut the funding here, have you had trouble with it because of the economic recession?

Archbishop Myers: We've had trouble with it because the federal government is changing and the state government, too, is changing the reimbursement formula. So we're getting reimbursed at a lower cost on many programs. That's why we have to help make up the difference and do fund raising and all that sort of thing.

Goodness: tI don't know whether Monsignor Reilly mentioned this, but he's on the Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel for Immigration. We have a seat at the table in the highest level in the state in that.

NCR:tYou are known as a priest-rich archdiocese. I am told that part of the reason you have high ordination numbers is the Neocatechumenate.

Archbishop Myers:tI would say that may have been true ten years ago before I came, but in this class, it may be three or four of the 13. That's part of the reason.

NCR:tBreak it down for me. You say you have 10 out of 13?

Archbishop Myers:tThirteen, and three or four of them are Neocatechumenal. The rest are?well, Neocats are ours, too. They're fully incardinated into the archdiocese.

NCR:tI have to ask you this question because I keep hearing about Neocats. Regularly what I'm getting is two readings from the same people. On the one side, they're good, hard working priests.

Archbishop Myers: And they outreach to the people that we would not reach before.

NCR: They bring people back into the Church who wouldn't come back in before, and they are attracting vocations.

Archbishop Myers: From around the world.

NCR: The other side is sometimes it feels like they're creating a parallel Church. One example is there are two Easter vigils in the same parish.

Archbishop Myers: Although the pastor could forbid that and I discourage it.

NCR: Okay, but there is a divisive element. The clergy are divided over, "Do we like them or do we not like them?" They are ordained for the Diocese of Newark but I'm told that in five years, they can go anywhere.

Archbishop Myers: No, that's not true.

NCR: That's not true?

Archbishop Myers: No, they can only go where I assign them.

NCR: Oh, I see. They're just here?

Archbishop Myers: Where I assign them is up to me.

NCR: Okay, so they can't request that they be assigned somewhere else?

Archbishop Myers: They can make a request as any priest can.

NCR: Are they an order?

Archbishop Myers: No, it's a movement and it's formally recognized as a charism in the Church, but it's under the Pontifical Council for Laity so it's not a religious community at all.

NCR: Okay, so there is nobody out there saying we need our guys here?

Archbishop Myers: Well, they can't do that, although the founders who live in Rome kind of supervise. They come to me if they have a problem. The priests come to me if they have a problem.

NCR: I guess you inherited them.

Archbishop Myers: I did.

NCR: The question bluntly is were you happy to inherit them? Are you glad they're here?

Archbishop Myers: Well, I had invited them to Peoria. I didn't know much about them. I had a very small group in Peoria, and my goal has been fuller integration into our presbyterate and then their groups or communities into our parishes. We've done some of that. We don't have separate ordinations. They take courses with our faculty at our major seminary at Seton Hall University, which we own. We are moving towards integration, but again, it's a long term process.

NCR: But as a movement, you're asking them then, if they're going to be integrated, to kind of go away as a movement.

Archbishop Myers: No, I'm not going to ask them to do that. I'm going to ask them to be more present as priests in the activities of our priests when we get together and as parishioners, to be more active in their parishes. Again, it takes time and I think any movement takes time to achieve ecclesial maturity. I think if we simply attack them directly, that's not a wise pastoral thing, but to use their gifts, to welcome their gifts and to suggest change is what I'm trying to do. The Bishop knows them all, too.

Bishop da Cunha: Well, before I became Bishop, I was a pastor of a parish that had the Neocatechumenate community. Although I agree with some of the more negative side or shortcomings of the movement, I think the good outweighs the bad because they really do a lot of good. I think there is room for integration and I think that's the goal that we should all aim for.

Archbishop Myers: He plays soccer with them. He's a true Brazilian.

Bishop da Cunha: One of the things that we used to do in the parish is that once a month, they have to come to the parish Mass, because most of the time they have their own Mass on Saturday evening, but once a month, they have to come to the parish Mass. On occasion, they have to come to the parish Mass.

If you work with them in this way, you avoid the parallel church, because in some places, there is that tendency to create that parallel church. I think that the Bishop and the pastor, if they work really close with them, they can be a benefit to the life of the parish, too. If they are left alone, then it could be dangerous to it.

NCR: But you found the movement more positive?

Bishop da Cunha: Yes.

Archbishop Myers: We have three seminaries in the Archdiocese, and I try to get to each of them at least once per semester, so the major theologate at Seton Hall, we have a college seminary there. Then, of course, there is the Redemptoris Mater Missionary Seminary. I try to treat them all even handedly. I go to each seminary the same amount of times each semester so that I'm not favoring one over the other. That way, they get to know me and I get to know them. I think that's very important, too.

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NCR: In the quiet of your office or residence, after this many years as a bishop and archbishop, about what do you scratch your head and say, "I never expected?"

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Archbishop Myers: How mean some people can be.

NCR: Wow.

Goodness: We've been having a week.

Archbishop Myers: Not to me, but to one another and to some priests.

NCR: What's that precipitated by?

Archbishop Myers: Usually change of some kind, and so that's been a surprise for me. The biggest surprise for me coming to Newark was how wonderful the people are, how welcoming they've been to me, and how welcoming the priests have been to me. When the Nuncio asked me to come, he said, "The

Holy Father wants you to become Archbishop of Newark.? I said, ?New Jersey??

tI had the image of the riots and that sort of thing. New Jersey is a wonderful state with wonderful people, and although I miss my family in Illinois and the people I was with for 35 years, this has been a joy. It's a lot of work. It's a big diocese, but I have good people around me.

NCR:tIt's a big diocese and a tough city.

Archbishop Myers:tIt is a tough city, but I don't know that we've run into the toughness as other people do.

Goodness: tWe have very good relations.

Archbishop Myers:tI think our relations are good with the county executives and the mayors. We have huge celebrations for law enforcement personnel from all over the state every year. If you haven't seen it, it's one of the great churches in the Western Hemisphere, this cathedral.

Goodness: tJust a few weeks ago, we hosted the city's Holocaust memorial service. It's something that's been going on for 22 years.

Archbishop Myers:tOne year I spoke at it and this year, we hosted it. We cooperate whenever we can. I guess when I was saying how mean people can be, I worry about priests, and when they come in hurting because people have done things that weren't nice to them. That upsets me.

Roberts: ttHow mean do people get? Are they really nasty?

Archbishop Myers:tNo, I would just say kind of either writing or verbal harassment.

NCR:tI know God is with us, and it's his Church, but otherwise, when you ponder the state of things in the off hours, where do you find hope?

Archbishop Myers:tWe had three things, and Jim was part of it. In the last month, it was just remarkable with the campus ministries. I have like 11 campus ministries going now.

NCR:tAre those all priests?

Archbishop Myers:tNo, some are lay people. The director is a lay woman. She got her licentiate in Washington, D.C, at the John Paul II Institute. We had the first gathering for men at the Senator Codey Arena, and we had 2,600 men show up. We had speakers. We had 70 or 80 priests show up for confessions. There were people in tears. We're still getting letters and emails. It was a profoundly emotional experience.

tWe had a Spanish component, too, and the women's commission has been growing, too. We had it in Nutley. We had 900 women show up for the day, again with priest confessors and talks and that sort of thing. Ten days ago, at the huge Youth Center we have in Kearny, there were 300 young people who spent two nights and three days in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, sometimes all night.

tI had a closing Mass as I did at each of these, so the Spirit is moving. To me, this is a great sign of hope. All the seminarians, the young people, both on the college and university campuses and these other groups, I am filled with hope, really.

NCR:tOne last question is how do you find time to write science fiction?

Archbishop Myers: First of all, have you ever gone to the web site, www.SpaceVulture.com?

NCR: I have not.

Archbishop Myers: You might enjoy it. Gary Wolf and I grew up in the same small town in Illinois, and we were kind of friends from when we were two and went to school together. Gary created Roger and Jessica Rabbit. Not Gene Wolf, but Gary Wolf. He created Roger and Jessica Rabbit and then he became a full-time science fiction writer. We've always read science fiction together.

He and his wife, Bonnie, live in Brighton, Massachusetts. The first book we read when we were in seventh grade was called *Space Hawk*. He found two antique copies of *Space Hawk* and sent me one, and said, "Why don't you read it?" I read it and he called me. He and Bonnie come down some times to visit. He said, "What did you think?" I said, "It's awful. I don't know what we ever saw in it."

He said, "Why don't we write it the way it should be today?" So we got a publisher in New York, TOR Publications. We started out and we were doing it by phone, e-mail, and fax. They would come down sometimes, so it was a happenstance, a sometimes thing. Our editor said, "You're writing too heady and stuff. Why don't you try to write the way it would have been in the 1950s when you started writing?"

We had to change the title just to be safe legally, so it went from *Space Hawk* to *Space Vulture*. We would just exchange ideas. He'd say, "No, do a paragraph like this." He's obviously a more experienced writer than I am in science fiction, so he was the captain of the team, but I helped. He's an only child. I'm the oldest of seven so I had to help him understand how brothers interrelate. There was character development and I was able to contribute that kind of thing, some writing and some words, and even some paragraphs, even though I acknowledge him as the captain of the team. When I had a free evening, I would do some work. He was a full-time writer, so he could get at it more easily than I could. It was fun.

NCR: Thank you very much.



Tom Roberts, NCR editor at large, is traveling the country reporting on parish life. He is on the first of several trips he plans to take, this time moving through Ohio, eastward into New Jersey and on to the nation's capital. His e-mail address is troberts@ncronline.org. Read the full series here: **[In Search of the Emerging Church](#)**.

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