

*“It’s at those critical moments  
 that you lose people or bring them back.”*

# A bishop on a mission

Zubik marks 10 years of embracing change  
 to strengthen Diocese of Pittsburgh

By Peter Smith  
 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Scores of young adults, most of them dressed business-casual for the after-work gathering, chatted over Coronas and nachos on a crowded rooftop bar at the Steel Cactus in Shadyside on a warm spring night.

One arrival didn’t fit the demographic — a tall, slightly stooped, gray-haired man dressed in black, who patiently made his way through the crowd, stopping for short conversations.

Eventually the banter subsided, the participants recited a Hail Mary and an organizer introduced Bishop David A. Zubik as the speaker of the evening’s gathering. The event was one of a series known as Theology on Tap, a casual setting for young and often single Catholic adults to meet, network and talk spirituality over suds.

Taking the Catholic Church beyond its buildings, trying to reach an age group that’s often taking itself out of the church entirely — the evening’s themes neatly captured some of Bishop Zubik’s highest priorities as he approaches the 10th anniversary, this Thursday of his installation as bishop of the six-county Diocese of Pittsburgh.

Bishop Zubik, 68, leads a flock of more than 600,000, by far the biggest religious population in southwestern Pennsylvania. But the flock has been suffering long-running losses in members, participation and priests, particularly among

young adults.

So the bishop is proposing something radically different from the institutional Catholicism in which he grew up during the mid-20th century — a historic wave of parish mergers to get the church living within its means and strengthened for evangelism and outreach.

Bishop Zubik told the Theology on Tap gathering that in discussions with parishioners across the diocese, “You know what the No. 1 concern is? You guys. What’s happening to our youth and young adults?”

He realizes that he can’t sit at the cathedral waiting for people to show up on their own. He says he needs to get out and meet people, whether at a rooftop bar, on an Uber ride or somewhere else.

“You guys want to be involved,” he added. “You’re not going to be passive spectators like the people in my generation. If you’re not going to be invited to be involved, you’re going to be looking for involvement in someplace else.”

He’s been telling the following anecdote a lot in recent months:

The day after his homecoming in Pittsburgh in 2007 upon his appointment as bishop here, he got on a plane to return to Green Bay, Wis., to wrap up his four-year tenure as bishop there.

His seatmate on the plane noticed him praying the rosary. That led to a conversation in which the seatmate

told Bishop Zubik he used to be a Catholic but was now a Buddhist. The man said: “I believe in Jesus, but I don’t know that I’ve ever seen a Christian who really tries to be like Jesus.”

That encounter, Bishop Zubik said, “has guided everything I have tried to do in the last 10 years.”

He’s trying to “get people excited about their faith, coming to know Jesus, coming to reflect Jesus with the ultimate goal what God’s dream is about, that we all get to heaven.”

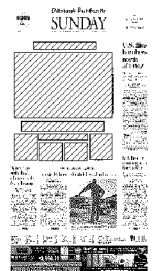
## Ambridge roots

David Allen Zubik grew up in the mill town of Ambridge, the grandson of Polish and Slovak immigrants. His father, Stanley, who worked at supermarket and assembly line jobs, and his mother, Susan, cultivated a strong devotion in their only son, never pushing him to the priesthood but celebrating when he entered.

Seven Catholic parishes served Ambridge’s ethnic communities. The Zubiks went to the Polish one, St. Stanislaus, whose longtime pastor was on non-speaking terms for years with his counterpart at the Italian parish. One day, a special ceremony forced them to meet. Coincidentally or not, one of the priests died that night.

Catholics today don’t have the luxury of such rivalries, Bishop Zubik said.

After the previous round of wide-scale parish closings in the 1990s, he had to accept



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the closure of St. Stanislaus. In those earlier closings, then-Father Zubik assisted his predecessor as bishop, now-Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C.

"I'm not insensitive to the pain people are feeling" about their sanctuaries possibly closing, he said. "I know what it feels like to lose the church building where my faith was nurtured."

Today, Good Samaritan Parish stands as the sole merged successor to the ethnic parishes.

"That church in Ambridge today is much more alive and embraces what it means to be church than any of those seven churches did when they were separate," he said.

### 'Pastoral sense'

Bishop Zubik became a priest in 1975, auxiliary bishop of Pittsburgh in 1997 and bishop of Green Bay in 2003 before taking on his current role in 2007.

The numerical declines among Pittsburgh Catholics far predate his tenure as bishop, going back at least as far as the steel bust of the 1980s. And while coping with these losses has occupied much of his time, this effort hasn't alone defined his tenure.

He's widely considered to be personable, leaning in closely and attentively in conversations with Catholic lay people, non-Catholics and others. He was credited with choosing to reside in a modest apartment at St. Paul Seminary in East Carnegie and selling the Squirrel Hill mansion where his predecessors lived.

"Aside from public leadership, what I appreciate is his pastoral sense," said Sister Mary Pellegrino, congregational moderator for the Sisters of St. Joseph, based in Baden, where then-Father Zubik was a chaplain decades ago.

During a recent year declared by Pope Francis to honor those in consecrated

life, Bishop Zubik "made a special effort to visit and spend time particularly with our retired sisters throughout the diocese," she said. "It was particularly meaningful for our sisters, some of whom taught him in Ambridge."

Maureen O'Brien, associate professor of theology at Duquesne University, said Bishop Zubik has shown a "lively curiosity about the mission of our schools."

He meets regularly with students and professors from the diocese's three Catholic colleges, Carlow, Duquesne and La Roche, eager to learn more about "what their needs are, what their level of faith is, how they situate themselves in relationship with the church."

In an era when many cities' ecumenical organizations have fizzled, Bishop Zubik takes an active role in Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania, said its executive minister, the Rev. Liddy Barlow. The organization coordinates efforts among Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox jurisdictions in the region.

"He doesn't just sit at meeting tables, he makes friends," she said.

Rabbi Aaron Bisno of Rodef Shalom Congregation in Shadyside agreed. The two recently returned from a group trip to Israel where Jews and Catholics visited pilgrimage sites and shared their impressions.

"The highest praise is to be a mensch," a Yiddish expression for "a humble, thoughtful, centered individual," he said.

### Courts and controversies

Yet Bishop Zubik has had his share of controversies.

In two pending lawsuits in Washington County, stemming from his closure of parishes there, groups of parishioners accuse him of fraud for raising funds for churches he allegedly knew ahead of time he was plan-

ning to close. He and the diocese have denied the allegations, adding that any funds raised for a closed parish would go to the one it merged into, not the diocese itself.

And while Bishop Zubik doesn't fit the mold of culture warrior as much as some other Catholic bishops, his name was attached to Zubik v. Burwell, a high-stakes battle before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Bishop Zubik and other plaintiffs argued that religious charities and schools should not be forced to have any part in the Obamacare mandate that women employees receive contraceptives under their health plans.

The Supreme Court punted the case back to lower courts, and settlement negotiations continue.

At the same time, he has opposed Republican-led attempts to repeal Obamacare if they were to leave people without affordable health insurance.

Bishop Zubik has lamented the political divisions that slashed through the Catholics as much as other Americans. He defies easy political categories, fighting aspects of President Barack Obama's health law but also staunchly speaking up for embattled immigrants and refugees.

At a Duquesne University Mass in the wake of the racially motivated murder and violent in Charlottesville, Va., he denounced the rising bigotry as an "evil that's in front of us."

Bishop Zubik has lamented that political and religious discourse has become so fierce: He even received a hate message for authorizing Catholics to eat corned-beef on St. Patrick's Day, which landed on a normally meatless Friday in Lent in 2017. (The correspondent told him he was endangering souls.)

And a dark cloud of a different nature is hovering over the diocese.

The Pennsylvania attorney general's office last year subpoenaed seven decades' worth of diocesan archives on sexual abuse by priests in Pittsburgh and five other Catholic dioceses.

Pittsburgh has had a better reputation than most dioceses in responding to abuse in recent decades, and many abuse cases here have already been documented, but there's plenty of dark history to find in any chancery archive, as shown in earlier grand jury reports on the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown.

"We're just waiting to hear what's going to happen from the attorney general's office," Bishop Zubik said. "We were very honest about turning everything over. I just hope that in the end we're going to get a fair shake."

## Health challenges

On a recent summer day, Bishop Zubik sat with five other priests at a long table in St. Paul's Seminary. They sang an a cappella hymn and recited Psalms and prayers, the midday portion of devotions known as the Liturgy of the Hours that form part of a priest's daily devotions. Afterward they got up to serve themselves from a buffet of green and fruit salads and shrimp creole with rice.

Bishop Zubik hosted such lunches all summer long, each weekday with a different group of priests, listening to their concerns in a confidential setting.

He was making the best of the requirement that he stay homebound while recovering from disc surgery intended to relieve nerve pressure that had already cost him feeling in his foot.

"It's not even guaranteed that I'm going to get my feeling back," he said. Nerve regeneration, if it happens, could take a year or more.

Even before the surgery, he had to give up driving to his various appointments, which he missed. But he

found a new calling in meeting the Uber drivers who get the app's message to pick up "David."

"You get in the car, they start to talk, and their lives are inspirations," he said.

He tells of meeting a discouraged former teacher, a recovering addict and others reflecting "the beauty of humanity and the messiness of it all."

## On Mission

By late summer, with medical restrictions eased, Bishop Zubik was back on the road, getting rides throughout the diocese to promote the restructuring known as On Mission for the Church Alive.

Between the years 2000 and 2015, the diocese saw a 16 percent decline in members, far outpacing the region's more modest population loss. More dramatically, it saw declines of about 40 percent in Mass attendance and confirmations, with infant baptisms, church marriages and K-8 school enrollment down about 50 percent.

The ranks of priests, many at or close to retirement, are expected to drop by half in the next decade.

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The On Mission recommendations call for merging the current 188 parishes into 48. Most would keep more than one church building open, but many sanctuaries will close.

Bishop Zubik envisions centralized parishes, each staffed with, among other things, a pastor, a youth minister and a chaplain. The chaplain would reach elders in such settings as nursing homes and hospices and also their adult children and grandchildren.

"If somebody has left the church for one reason or another, if the priest comes in every day when this guy or gal's mother's dying, he's there for

them," he said. "It's at those critical moments that you lose people or bring them back."

Planning continues, with Bishop Zubik due to make final decisions in April 2018. Years of implementation will follow.

"People say, 'I love what you're doing, but don't you dare close my church,'" Bishop Zubik said. "I hear that all the time, when I get my hair cut, if I'm pumping gas. The fact is, we've got to do what we've got to do for the church."

The Rev. John Oesterle, a hospital chaplain at UPMC Mercy and a longtime member of the Association of Pittsburgh Priests, a progressive group that's independent of the diocese, applauded Bishop Zubik for taking on the task.

"His effort to try to be as encouraging and affirming as possible is a tremendous gift to all of us," he said. While On Mission calls for ample use of lay ministers, Father Oesterle said he hopes the diocese would take a closer look at using them as parish life coordinators, a model used in some other dioceses.

"There are many married men and women who would be superb leaders of parishes and they've had the education and experience," he said.

## Staying put

While Pittsburgh has been a launching pad for previous bishops, three of whom went on to become cardinals in more prominent U.S. archdioceses or Vatican roles in the past half-century, Bishop Zubik doesn't anticipate a move. At age 68, it would be late in his career to take on a larger role, but he hopes to keep working here at least through age 75, at which bishops have to offer their resignations to the

pope.

But “there he is, he’s the one who calls the shots,” Bishop Zubik said, pointing to a portrait of Pope Francis in his office, where it shares space with an antique drawing of the Vatican, various works of Judaica and a large icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a focus of Hispanic Catholic devotion.

Bishop Zubik sees in the populist pontiff a

model of what Catholics need to be doing locally.

“I love him because he first and foremost is speaking to people who have lost a sense of God,” he said.

If that’s what Bishop Zubik is trying to model on the local level, the message got through to the young adults at Theology on Tap.

“It’s cool to see a bishop at a bar,” said

Nick Wytiaz, 29, of Bloomfield. “He takes time in talking with the young people. We’re the young people who are involved, so I think he’s expecting big things from us. I don’t want to let him down.”

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## Bishop David A. Zubik: biographical highlights

### Early life

- Born Sept. 4, 1949, in Sewickley, to the late Stanley and Susan (Raskosky) Zubik. Raised in Ambridge.
- Baptized Sept. 18, 1949, St. Stanislaus Church, Ambridge.
- First Communion on June 1, 1958, St. Stanislaus.
- Confirmation on April 30, 1960, St. Stanislaus.

### Education

- St. Stanislaus Grade School, Ambridge, 1955-1963.
- St. Veronica High School, Ambridge, 1963-1967.
- Bachelor of arts, Duquesne University, 1971.
- Master of divinity, St. Mary Seminary, Baltimore, 1975.
- Master’s in education administration, Duquesne University, 1982.

### Ministry as priest

- Ordained May 3, 1975, at St. Paul Cathedral.
- Parochial vicar of Sacred Heart Parish, Shadyside, 1975-1980.
- Vice principal of Quigley Catholic High School in Baden, 1980-1987.
- Chaplain to the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse and students at Mount Galitzin Academy.
- Administrative secretary to former Pittsburgh bishops Anthony J. Bevilacqua and Donald W. Wuerl, 1987-1991.

- Director of clergy personnel, 1991-1996.
- Vicar general, general secretary of Diocese of Pittsburgh, 1996-2003.

### Ministry as bishop

- Consecrated a bishop on April 6, 1997, at St. Paul Cathedral.
- Auxiliary bishop of Diocese of Pittsburgh, 1997-2003.
- Appointed bishop of Green Bay, Wis., Oct. 10, 2003, by Pope John Paul II.
- Appointed bishop of Pittsburgh, July 18, 2007, by Pope Benedict XVI.
- Installed as bishop of Pittsburgh, St. Paul Cathedral, Sept. 28, 2007.

### Other roles

- U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops: committees on divine worship; domestic justice and human development; and protection of children and young people.
- Represents conference in Catholic-Jewish dialogue and as its liaison to Catholic Charities USA.

### Governing boards

- The Papal Foundation;
- St. Mary’s Seminary and University;
- St. Vincent College, Latrobe;
- St. Vincent Seminary.

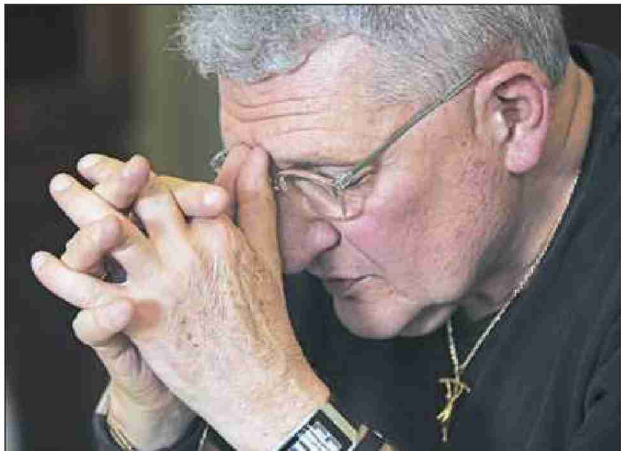
### Ecumenical, civic work

- Vice chair, Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania
- Boards of United Way and Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh.



Nate Guidry/Post-Gazette

Bishop David Zubik speaks with young adults during a Theology on Tap gathering sponsored by the Catholic Young Adult Ministry at the Steel Cactus Mexican Restaurant and Cantina earlier this summer in Shadyside.



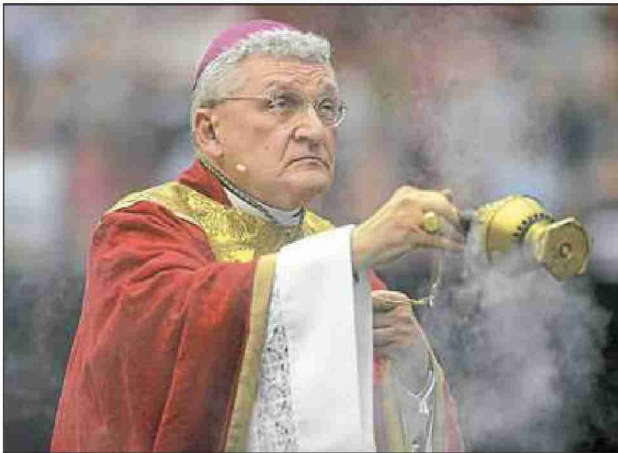
Bishop Zubik prays before having lunch with priests July 28 at St. Paul Seminary in East Carnegie.





Nate Guidry/Post-Gazette photos

Bishop David Zubik leads the procession marking the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe Dec. 12, 2016, at St. Paul Cathedral in Oakland. The service drew together Hispanic Catholics and others from throughout the Pittsburgh region.



Bishop Zubik celebrates Mass on Aug. 20 at Duquesne University. More than 3,000 people attended.