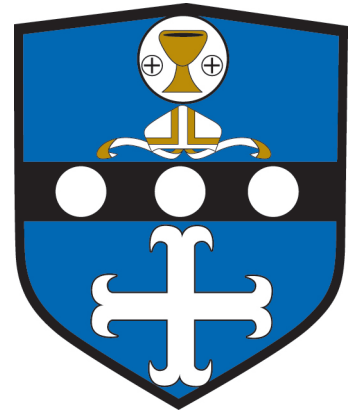


Supporting The Mission



By Tony DeGol

Matt Stever vividly remembers his first few days working for the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown in 2014.

He approached Bishop Mark to ask a reasonable question: Can you tell me what your mission is for the Diocese?

“What’s written at the end of the Gospel of Matthew: To go forth and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” the Bishop responded.

As Chief Financial Officer for the diocese, Stever was not directly involved in specific liturgical ministries. Still, Bishop Mark’s answer resonated with him.

He quickly realized that even his “number crunching” played a key role in helping the clergy and lay people around him achieve that mission.

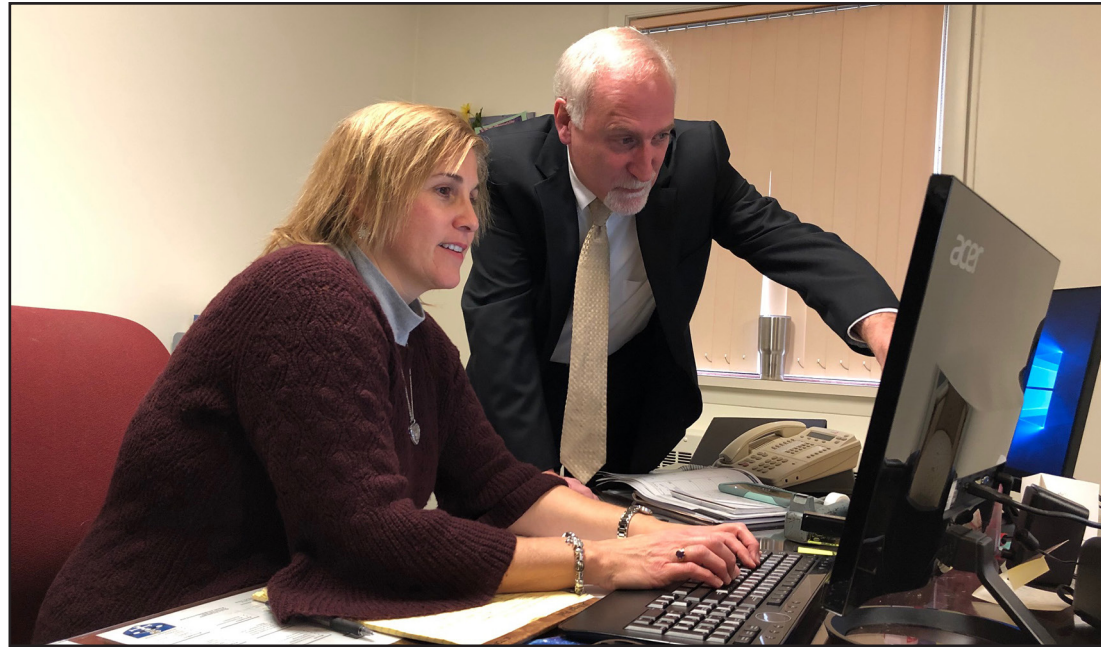
It was not long after that conversation that scrutiny of the diocese and its history of clergy sexual abuse intensified. It by no means derailed Stever’s focus, but it certainly made it more challenging.

“There is not a day that goes by that I don’t deal with some aspect of the sexual abuse crisis in my work,” he admitted.

As the diocese releases a summary of the financial costs of sexual abuse from 1999 to the present, (*please see page 10*), Stever realizes this is a key turning point for the Church of Altoona-Johnstown.

“I’m happy these numbers have been announced so the faithful are aware that there has been a true effort to begin the healing process,” he noted.

Stever is specifically referring to the Victim Assistance Program that began in this diocese in 2004 to assist the survivors of sexual abuse. Over the years, close to 300 individuals have been helped



STAYING ON MISSION: Chief Financial Officer Matt Stever talks with Annette Wholaver, a member of the Finance Office staff. Stever and his team remain focused on the mission to better support parishes and diocesan operations, despite the financial challenges of the clergy sex abuse crisis.

by the program, which offered support through settlements and counseling whether or not the survivors came forward within the Statute of Limitations.

“The true benefit of our program is the fact that it allows for a path for people to begin the healing process,” commented Stever.

Also, the program has never required a survivor to have legal representation, and those who chose to not have an attorney ended up with 100 percent of any financial settlement.

Recently, other dioceses in Pennsylvania announced plans for a Victim Compensation Fund. The Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown plans to continue its Victim Assistance Program, which will still assist survivors and their loved ones through counseling even for those outside of the Statute of Limitations (*please see story on page 7*).

“I’m personally so proud to be a Catholic in this diocese

knowing that since 2004 we did not see the Statute of Limitations line in the sand,” he said. “Survivors who came forward were offered assistance. Was the cost significant? Yes, but the Church could not afford to ignore its moral obligation to help those who were hurting.”

Stever assured that the costs cited in the financial summary were covered by the sale of the Bishop’s residence in Hollidaysburg, the sale of the Diocesan Administration Center in Hollidaysburg, and through the diocese’s savings and property and casualty insurance program.

Contributions to the diocese through the former Annual Catholic Appeal and current Catholic Ministries Drive were never used for sexual abuse costs, he maintained. All money donated to the CMD supports designated ministries such as Vocations, Youth Ministry, and Christian Initiation.

Stever – although still im-

mersed in matters relating to the sex abuse crisis – is excited about what he describes as much-needed improvements to the financial operations of the diocese. The changes are the culmination of a two-and-a-half-year evaluation of the Finance Office and how it must better serve diocesan offices and the parishes.

In early 2019, the diocese will release an annual report that Stever calls a “completely transparent summary of the financial status of the diocese.” It will also identify areas where reductions in overall costs have been realized.

It all goes back to that conversation that Stever had with Bishop Mark in 2014 about his mission for the diocese.

“We are finding better ways to operate in this environment by reducing costs and creating appropriate internal controls, policies, and procedures that will relieve parishes of the temporal burdens they face,” Stever

mentioned. “The more efficient we can become, the more time pastors will be able to spend with parishioners and ultimately proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If we can reduce the temporal burdens they face, it will afford them the time to focus on being the priest the Lord called them to be.”

Continued Stever: “As challenging as it has been, we are committed in the Finance Office to do everything we can do to gain efficiency and assist parishes in sharing the Gospel. That’s my primary focus when I come to work every day.”

Advent Prayer of Self-Offering

O Lord, we bring to you our lives; troubled, broken or at peace; as a sacrificial offering for you to use as you will. Take away our selfishness and teach us to love as you loved. Take away our sense of pride and show us the meaning of humility. Take away our blindness and show us the world through your eyes. Take away our greed and teach us how to give as you gave. Show us your way and teach us your path. Lord Jesus, help us to walk with you more closely; our hand in your hand and our feet in your footsteps; from the baby in a stable, to the cross on Calvary and through your resurrection to eternity. Amen.