

Diversity 'sit down' with Biondi

Problems and solutions to inclusion were discussed

By Eric E. Vickers
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On July 17, in the spacious conference room of the Rev. Lawrence Biondi, the president of St. Louis University, the issue of minority inclusion in the St. Louis construction industry reached a pinnacle.

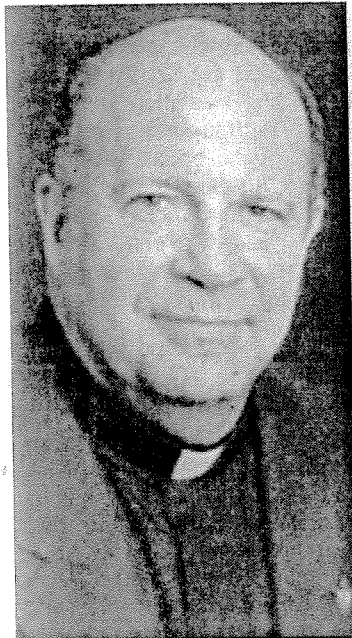
Seated around him in plush leather chairs, Father Biondi had assembled the movers and shakers in the construction industry for a "sit down" about minority inclusion.

Down one side of the long conference table sat the bosses of the city's premier general contracting firms — Clayco, SM Wilson, BSI, Alberici, McCarthy and Legacy — as well as the head of the organization that represents the general contractors, the AGC (Association of General Contractors).

Collectively, these companies handle billions of dollars of construction work annually and employ thousands of construction workers.

On the other side of Father Biondi sat the Minority Inclusion Alliance — the heads of the city's premier minority inclusion activist organizations — the Metro East Black Contractors Organization, Mokan, the St. Louis Minority Contractors Association, the Concerned Citizens Coalition and the National Action Network.

Collectively, these organizations have successfully engaged in numerous demonstrations and negotiations over minority inclusion on construction projects.



Rev. Lawrence Biondi



Eric E. Vickers

But missing from Father Biondi's conference table were the construction trade unions. The head of P.R.I.D.E — the construction industry's lead organization representing labor and management — was involved in a car accident just

sands of well-paying jobs and careers in the construction industry.

Quickly sizing up the union absentee situation, Father Biondi, calmly and without hesitating turned to the group and instructed: "Set the meet-

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hours before the meeting and was unable to attend, and the head of Building Trades Council, which represents all the unions involved in the building trades, said he had been unsuccessful in trying to change a previous commitment. The leader of the formidable carpenter's union, who had confirmed his attendance, for reasons unknown didn't show.

Collectively, these labor organizations oversee thou-

ing up with them for next week."

Pushing further, he asked pointedly, "What's our agenda when we meet with them?"

Then, across the table, began a discussion that was probably unlike any that has ever occurred before in this city.

"Father Biondi, back in 1990, we put in place a minority business inclusion program with a minority business goal of 25 percent," I said respect-

fully.

"We have now moved to the point where today we need to put in place a minority worker program and goal, and it needs to be done voluntarily, irrespective of any legal mandate. In other words, Father, we need the entire construction industry here to follow the example you've set on the arena project — having both minority business goals and minority workforce goals."

"Father, I think we're in a different time now and the unions know it," Bob Clark, president of Clayco, then spoke up.

"They may not be here today because of different circumstances but they're committed and they've acknowledged — and we all know — that we've got a problem. We're doing at Clayco 20 to 25 percent and over minority workforce inclusion on our projects, but if every general contractor in this room was doing the same on all their jobs, then we'd probably have a shortage of minority workers."

"But the good thing, Father, is that we know all the components, like the CPC and Charter School, that we need in order to achieve inclusion across the board on all these projects," Eddie Hasan, the venerable President of Mokan, then interjected.

"We know how to reach and teach our community. We have the components, Father, we just need you to help us bring them all together."

For close to two hours, problems and solutions to inclusion were discussed, marking a milestone in this city's long and tortured history of minority inclusion.

The sit down with the unions that is next stands to be a landmark.