

## Charlotte/Greece/Hilton Pastoral Planning Task Force March 5, 2024 –St. John the Evangelist

**ATTENDING: Holy Cross/Our Mother of Sorrows:** Fr. William Coffas, Father Justin Miller, **Holy Cross:** Joseph DiVincenzo, **Our Mother of Sorrows:** David Witkoski, **St. Charles Borromeo:** Fr. John Firpo, Gina Reeder, David Steklenski, **St. John the Evangelist:** Fr. Peter Enyan-Boadu, Paul Parkman, Nick Verdino, **St. Lawrence:** Fr. Lee Chase, Jeri Rombaut, **St. Leo's:** Father Joseph Catanise, David Jones, Barbara Surash, **St. Mark's:** Deacon Frank Pettrone, Peter Blind, **Facilitator:** Karen Rinefierd, **Minutes Scribe:** Maryanne Sutton

**EXCUSED: Holy Cross:** Ryan Snyder, **Our Mother of Sorrows:** Marc Boeh, **St. Lawrence:** Steve Amico, **St. Mark's:** Kimm Wesley

### NOTES

**Prayer** (Eph 2:4-10): faith sharing, intercessory prayers, the Lord's Prayer

### Discussion of the feedback on the draft Recommendation received from the parish staffs on 2/27

- Karen noted that, while she was present at the day, led part of it, and heard the reporting back from the small groups, she was not a part of any of the small groups' discussions. The Pastoral Leaders were each seated with a small group. Therefore, they are the ones best able to answer questions about the conversations that took place at the tables.
- Question: Was it clear to members what our goal was based on the questions that were asked?
  - Response: The knowledge among staff members was uneven: some, like the bulletin editors, were likely more familiar with all we have communicated; others were not.
  - We do need to include more regularly in communications the specific goal of our planning—namely that the Church's mission of Word, Worship, Community and Service continues in a vibrant way in our area under the constraints of demographics, financial resources, and priest availability.
  - The group did not have a clear idea of the work of the 7-parish committees.
  - Before the meeting everyone had a copy of the draft recommendation as well as the data we've collected.
- Some staff members had financial questions which were out of the scope of the work of the task force or, in some cases, what local parishes can decide. We should consider this as we asked for staff input.
- We need to pay attention to what the staff members said was missing from the draft recommendation: evangelization (growing our churches by spreading the good news), the work of the 7-parish subcommittees, and finances.
- How well are we communicating with our parishes?
- We need to continue to enhance education of the realities of why we have a task force: loss of revenue, priests, and parishioners; aging church campuses.
- There was a realization of issues facing the parishes. What is the reality of the future?
- We need to focus on how to serve our Catholic community.
- Fr. Chase mentioned a recent change in the Diocese of Joliet, Illinois. (<https://www.ncronline.org/news/joliet-bishop-announces-merging-closure-9-catholic-parishes>) Sixteen parishes are going to be reconfigured into 7 parishes with 5 churches closing. The intent is to best use the diocese's resources for the future and evangelization.
- Fr. Chase passed out copies of Canon 517, paragraph 1, which was mentioned at the staff gathering by Fr. Sirianni, as well as 3 examples of commentary on it. Canon 517: "When circumstances require it, the pastoral care of a parish or of several parishes together can be entrusted to a team of several priests *in solidum* with the requirement, however, that one of them should be the moderator

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in exercising pastoral care, that is, he should direct their combined activity and answer for it to the bishop.”

- We need to submit multiple recommendations, several different options, to the bishop and realize that he has a different vantage point since he is responsible for the diocese as a whole.
- We currently have a narrow recommendation to the bishop. We are working on one model (clustering). What are we doing to grow our parishes?
- How do we grow our parishes? Our parishes have viability and stability.
- Parents always complain that they didn't have advance notice when schools are closed. We need to communicate with parishioners as completely as possible.
- Most parishes nationwide (particularly in the northern half of the United States) are having the same problems.
- From experience when you cluster parishes, you lose parishioners.
- How do we attract people to church and envision a new future? How do we do both: attract people to the church and deal with the reality we have today?
- Perhaps next year's Lent retreat could have as presenter someone from beyond our diocese with a vision for the future.
- We need to be more hospitable.
- Our faith is not in buildings but in what unites us.
- Trend: Older parishioners who are passing away were the large financial contributors.
- After parishes in the 19<sup>th</sup> Ward clustered, many of the church campuses closed. That was the recommendation from the 19<sup>th</sup> Ward parishes to the bishop. They had many buildings that were hard to keep up and all weren't needed. The parishes wanted to use their financial resources toward their mission and not just to maintain buildings.
- In planning groups within our diocese over the past two decades there was a lot of energy for working out what to do about priests/clustering; the energy level dropped afterward when collaboration centered on improving the church's ministry.
- This task force has recognized the importance of evangelization and other parts of the church's mission as well as wanting to prepare recommendations to address declining priest availability.
- Should we do more work before gathering the Finance/Pastoral Councils?
- Taking our time to put together recommendations is wise. Create SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timebound).
- Nothing we recommend will be a fast fix.
- Fear and anxiety about the future are real among parishioners; recommendations will be welcome.
- Remember that this task force was started by the pastoral Leaders not the bishop. We need to keep communicating that to parishioners.
- Staff members were glad that this group exists.
- We need to be more hospitable in our churches and to evangelize.
- The reality is that the population in this area is dropping. The Covid pandemic aftermath led to significant declines in Mass attendance. Attendance is starting to go up but is not at earlier levels. How long will we be able to maintain all the buildings we have?
- When we look at our buildings it's not simply thinking about closures; we could also consider repurposing our churches or other buildings as has happened in other parts of the diocese.
- There can still be a Catholic presence in repurposing buildings—for example, Providence Housing built housing at the former St. Salome's in Irondequoit, and locally we have the new use of the old church at St. Leo's.
- Evangelization happens most easily at the parish level—perhaps outsource most of evangelization to each parish? We could do some things together and share with each other what is being done at each parish.

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- If we need more time in preparing our recommendations, we should allow that.
- We need to remember that the financial picture of the parish is not a reflection of the pastoral leadership.
- Will the parishes be able to sustain what we have once changes happen?
- What will happen to vacant buildings/what will we be able to sustain in the future? Buildings can be sold, rented, or repurposed.
- Clustered parishes often combine staffs over time. We have several shared staff positions already among our parishes.
- Should we bring in the financial directors to share their views with the task force? Not at this time. Finance is a score card; we should focus on evangelization. Ministry before the budget.
- We need to hear from our parish committees to get their involvement.
- We have to get out in our communities and evangelize.
- Question: Should we share with all parishioners the draft recommendation that the staff received? Response: no, as we will be making changes to it and parishioners might draw conclusions that aren't accurate.
- Question: Parishioners keep asking what a cluster is. Parishioners think (or believe) clustering is the same as closing. Response: The definition of clustering is "two or more parishes with the same leader." Comment: I see this as a project for the Task Force, to simply explain what is clustering and prepare for its coming, possibly within the 2-4 years.
- Question: Why do we have the assumption in the draft recommendation that limits any future clustering to our 7 parishes without including other nearby parishes? Response: When the possibility of adding others was raised at a previous task force meeting, Karen reached out to the diocese for guidance and was told to stay with these 7 parishes, knowing that things could change in the future.

Decision: to cancel the April 22<sup>nd</sup> Pastoral Council/Finance Council meeting. We will pause to reflect, address what we've received from the parish staffs, and regroup.

Homework: Please share any ideas for questions to ask or how to structure the next task force meeting with Karen.

Action: Pastoral leaders to communicate to their pastoral and finance councils that their 4/22 meeting with the task force is cancelled and why.

**Next Task Force Meeting: Monday, April 22, 6:30 PM in Deacon Hall at St. Lawrence.**