

Area Catholic Communities: Planning for a strong and vibrant future

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

For the last three years, our diocese has been engaged in a pastoral planning process to strengthen parish life and revitalize our mission as baptized members of the Body of Christ here in central Minnesota. It's a process that builds on the dedicated work of the missionaries and immigrant settlers who first planted and nurtured the seeds of faith in our area 150 years ago. And it looks ahead to the next decades as we strive for ever-better ways to proclaim the Good News of Christ and to be wise stewards of our parish resources.

I initiated this pastoral planning process for several reasons. The landscape of our diocese is changing. The overall Catholic population of our 16-county diocese has been declining over the last 30 years, and it also has been shifting. Our rural, western counties are shrinking in population, while our eastern counties, closer to the Twin Cities, are growing. We have a growing number of Latino Catholics, many of whom need spiritual and pastoral care in Spanish.

We also have fewer priests than we once did. We project that in about a decade, we will have fewer than 60 priests under age 70 to serve our current 131 parishes. We're working hard (and I hope you are, too) to cultivate more vocations to the priesthood, but this will continue to be a challenge for the foreseeable future.

I don't necessarily view these trends in a negative light, and I hope you don't either. They simply describe the current and future realities that we must address together. Our Church has faced many similar challenges — and certainly more severe ones — during its 2,000-year history. This pastoral planning challenge, in fact, presents us with opportunities to revitalize our faith, make our parishes more vibrant, and strengthen the Church for its mission for many, many years to come.

I have said many times in meetings over the last few years that I didn't initiate this pastoral planning process simply because we have fewer priests. All of the changes I noted above require us to think about "being Church" in a new way — one in which we rethink our traditional territorial parish structure so that we can be more effective in forming and sustaining disciples given these new realities.

The goal of our process is to maintain a Catholic presence in all areas of our diocese. This includes ensuring that people have access to the Sunday Eucharist — the source and summit of our faith — within a reasonable distance from their homes. At this time, no churches are closing as a result of this process.

So, what does the way forward look like?

Every parish in the Diocese of St. Cloud will be part of an Area Catholic Community comprised of two or more parishes in a given region. There will be 29 ACCs spread throughout the diocese. These ACCs will be different than the "clustering" arrangements many of our parishes are currently a part of. Clustered parishes negotiate Mass times and shared bulletins but often think of themselves as independent from one another.

As part of an ACC, however, parishes will be called to new levels of collaboration and resource-sharing. Pastors will work closely with lay staff, deacons, volunteers and all the baptized from the ACC's parishes to meet the area's spiritual and pastoral needs.

Our diocesan planning office and planning council will offer guidelines and suggestions for how ACCs might approach this, but in many ways the ACCs will only be limited by their own creativity. For example, a parish with a vibrant faith formation program or growing social concerns committee might offer this gift to the other parishes of the ACC. Parishes might come together to pay a just and living wage for a shared business manager.

Collaboration, not competition, is the key to the success of this process. Every person serving in a leadership position will need strong, ongoing formation appropriate to her or his role. One recent example of this is the lay leadership formation program in which our Latino brothers and sisters are currently enrolled. The program, which has about 50 people, is run in collaboration with the Institute of Pastoral Leadership at the University of St. Mary of the Lake in the Archdiocese of Chicago. It is preparing future leaders not only for our Latino community, but for our whole diocese.

Everyone has a role in this venture. I am reminded of St. Paul's words to the Corinthians: "As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12). Every person in our diocese — from pastors to every person in the pews — has a part in helping to build strong faith communities that nurture discipleship.

This plan has been finalized after much consultation with our pastors, the planning council and lay leaders, many of whom attended regional and parish meetings about the best way to move forward. I believe this approach will make our parishes stronger and more vibrant; in turn, this makes the Church beyond our parishes stronger and more vibrant. It helps us become a church focused on the mission of Christ, not simply maintenance.

If you haven't already, you will be hearing more about this pastoral planning process from your pastor and parish. One of the next steps is for each ACC to form a planning council with members commissioned by the pastors of the ACC's individual parishes. Formation days are planned in April and May for ACC council members to learn more about the vision for moving forward.

If you have any questions, I invite you to contact your pastor or Brenda Kresky, our diocese's director of pastoral planning, at bkresky@gw.stcdio.org or 320-529-4611.

May the Holy Spirit bless our efforts to renew our mission to be Christ's heart of mercy, voice of hope and hands of justice, now and far into the future.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+Donald J. Kettler
Bishop of Saint Cloud