

Boston studies parishes' future; change ahead for some Toledo parishes

BOSTON - In the Boston Archdiocese, a team of priests, deacons, religious and laypeople will help lay the groundwork for the archdiocese's future, which will likely result in fewer parishes but a similar number of churches that currently serve Catholics.

Boston Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley announced the formation of the Archdiocesan Pastoral Planning Commission Feb. 2. The 18-member board will make a final recommendation to him on a pastoral plan for resources available in the near future.

"This is an important endeavor that will help guide and shape the future of the archdiocese in meeting the pastoral needs of our parishes and ministries, and in advancing the mission of the church," the cardinal said.

Father Richard Erikson, archdiocesan vicar general and moderator of the curia, did not give a specific timeline for the group to accomplish its work but he said that by the end of the year church officials could have a sense of how to proceed.

About a week before the Boston announcement, officials in the Diocese of Toledo, Ohio, announced a three-year parish reorganization plan is to begin in July with changes for 13 parishes, which will either be twinned or merged with other parishes or will share a pastor. Over the next two years, further reorganization is planned that will affect another 20 parishes.

In Boston, Father Erikson said the timeline for implementing the pastoral plan over the long term has not been concretely established, but he said Cardinal O'Malley wants a gradual implementation.

The priest told The Pilot, the archdiocesan newspaper, that the committee's goals include assisting Cardinal O'Malley in presenting a future pastoral plan that will "be equal to the resources we have available" and helping the archdiocese prepare for

“challenges we will have in the future.”

He said he anticipated the plan will include a number of parish mergers with individual churches remaining open as places of worship.

“Our hope is to maintain and sustain as many churches as possible,” he said.

In contrast, the archdiocese shuttered dozens of church buildings as part of its 2004 parish reconfiguration process, roiling the local Catholic community and sparking several parish vigils and civil and canonical appeals.

Father Erikson expressed hope that 20 years from now, the archdiocese would have fewer parishes but “not dramatically fewer churches.”

He cited dwindling Mass attendance, financial strain on parishes and an anticipated diminishment of the number of priests available for active parish ministry as reasons for implementing a new pastoral plan.

Weekly Mass attendance has plummeted from about 70 percent of the archdiocese’s Catholics in the 1970s to 17 percent today.

Currently, the archdiocese has 291 parishes, with some cities and towns having multiple parishes.

In terms of financial challenges, operating expenses currently outstrip weekly offertory income in about 40 percent of the archdiocese’s parishes.

The number of archdiocesan priests available for parish ministry is expected to drop from today’s mark of 350 to 180 in 20 years.

“We have to have structures in place that respect the lives our priests live and don’t stretch their lives too thin,” Father Erikson said.

In 2007, Cardinal O’Malley formed the Office for Pastoral Planning to assess future needs of the archdiocese. The office began a series of consultations with priests and laity last year that identified essential elements of a comprehensive pastoral plan – elements that will be reviewed by this newly formed Pastoral Planning Commission.

The committee began meeting in January and will continue to meet twice a month in

upcoming months.

“We approach our work cognizant of the challenges and opportunities facing the Archdiocese of Boston and inspired by the grace of God’s presence,” said commission chairman Monsignor William Fay, pastor of St. Columbkille Parish in Brighton. “The cardinal has authorized us to shape a plan that will provide the local church with a roadmap for the future; a plan that supports the good work of our priests and which invigorates parish life.”

In the Diocese of Toledo, the aim of reorganization involves twinning parishes or clustering them so that one priest is assigned to a few parishes, said Jason Shanks, leader of the diocesan Evangelization and Pastoral Life Secretariat and director of the Office of Pastoral Planning.

The three-year plan is based on a study completed in 2005 that projected how many priests would be available to minister in the future. The report said the diocese in 2011 would have six fewer priests than in 2005 and 13 fewer in 2013, based on expected retirements, health and other factors.

Those projections are proving to be “spot-on,” Shanks said, noting that the diocese needs to organize itself to “maintain a community life with a sacramental presence” despite fewer priests.

Other factors used to determine which parishes should be reorganized included financial viability of parishes, Mass attendance, population trends, location, facility size, cultural diversity, and how a parish community could remain intact and stable. Shanks said he was also conscious of making sure lower socio-economic areas of Toledo were not disproportionately affected.

“It’s hard because these are places where people got married and where they were baptized,” he told the Catholic Chronicle, Toledo’s diocesan newspaper. Shanks also wanted to reorganize parishes in a way that the communities could continue to offer Mass on Sundays. By twinning, he believes the parish buildings can remain open in most cases.

Shanks said the decisions on the parish reorganization plan came from a

consultative process begun in September 2010. At that time, the Office of Pastoral Planning provided recommendations to deans and asked for feedback and other ideas. He noted that many of the final plans were suggested by people in the deaneries.

“We have to look at the particulars of each area and do what’s in the best interest of the parish, the deanery and the greater good of all the church,” Shanks said.

At the beginning of January, the parish reorganization plan was submitted to the bishop’s Cabinet for further discussion. Final decisions were made by Toledo Bishop Leonard P. Blair, who met personally with pastors involved in this year’s reorganization in mid-January.

While the twinning and clustering will continue through 2013, Shanks believes things will begin to level off, based on the number of seminarians and the number of men showing interest in considering priestly life as a vocation.

“There is still hopefulness in our future,” Shanks said. “As Catholics, we have to remain hopeful.”

Contributing to this story was Angela Kessler in Toledo.