

Changes in parishes coming for Detroit Archdiocese beginning 2012

DETROIT - Nine metro Detroit parishes will close over the next five years if Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron accepts the recommendations a mostly lay advisory board approved Nov. 30.

Another 60 parishes would be merged down to 21 if the recommendations of Detroit's Archdiocesan Pastoral Council are accepted as presented.

At a news conference Dec. 1, Archbishop Vigneron said he expects to announce a revised pastoral plan for the Archdiocese of Detroit by mid-February, after reviewing the recommendations and considering the input of other consultative bodies.

Altogether, the changes would reduce to 222 - down from 270 - the number of parishes in the six counties of the archdiocese.

While local media focused on the issue of church closings, Archbishop Vigneron emphasized that parish reorganization was only an aspect of a pastoral plan intended "to move the life of the church forward."

It is necessary to reorganize the parishes so the archdiocese will be in a better "position to bring people back to the practice of the faith and also offer the graces of church membership to new people."

A great deal of the voluminous material in the recommendations - all of which may be viewed at aodonline.org - concerns proposals for how parishes can cooperate to better serve the mission of the Catholic Church.

The archbishop acknowledged there is a sense of loss, a sense of dying about losing a parish, because of the key role that parishes play in the Christian life.

"But that's who we are: We die with Jesus in order to live with Jesus. I invite people to enter into this process with hope, and a belief that if we abandon ourselves to the Lord in trying to do the best that we can in a tough situation, the Lord will bring new

life out of it," he said.

Although the final version of the pastoral plan could differ from the recommendations as presented, Archbishop Vigneron said a great deal of work had been put into them, and "I would need a pretty good reason to move away from them."

The recommendations came out of a pastoral planning process – known as "Together in Faith Phase II" – that involved about 1,500 people from parishes throughout the archdiocese taking part in 40 planning groups during 2011.

The Archdiocesan Pastoral Council reviewed the proposals, and often sought clarifications or additional information from the planning groups before finalizing the recommendations it presented to the archbishop.

As with the 2006 pastoral plan that emerged from the first phase of "Together in Faith," the new plan seeks to employ the available physical, human and financial resources of the local church so as to best meet the spiritual and sacramental needs of the area's Catholics, as well as reaching out to the larger community through both evangelization and various ministries.

Unlike previous waves of parish closings, only a third of the parishes identified for definite closure in the current proposals are situated in the city of Detroit, with the others in mature suburban communities.

And, as with that previous effort, the re-examination of how resources should be deployed was prompted in part by the expectation of a continuing decline in the number of priests available for service and a combination of population shifts and overall population decline in the archdiocese. This time around, there also is the added impact of Michigan's continuing economic crisis.

Other city parishes would be affected as the process of merger and consolidation is worked out, however, as would a number of parishes in other parts of the archdiocese.

Of the city parishes named for closure, one is an ethnic Lithuanian parish in now heavily Hispanic southwest Detroit; the other two are general parishes on the city's

west side.

Meanwhile, in the Archdiocese of Boston, a proposal is under consideration to organize parishes into small groups to share resources, which it says will allow parishes to focus on the work of evangelization.

The plan, put forward by the Archdiocesan Planning Commission, was set to be unveiled at a gathering of all the priests in the archdiocese Dec. 5 and released to the public Dec. 6. However, details of the plan became public Dec. 1 after the media obtained documents describing the plan distributed in preparation for the gathering.

Monsignor William P. Fay, pastor of St. Columbkille in Brighton, and co-chairman of the Archdiocesan Planning Commission, said the archdiocese began planning the change with a key question in mind: "How can we re-energize the archdiocese in terms of moving out and bringing the Gospel of Christ to others in such a way that people are not only attracted but can become committed?"

Under the plan, the archdiocese's 290 parishes would be paired into 125 groups, most consisting of two or three parishes, which would be served by a pastoral service team, or PST, "consisting of priests, deacons, lay ecclesial ministers, finance councils and parish councils that serve multiple parishes," according to the archdiocesan document.

All parishes grouped under such a team would share the same pastor, who will lead the team in scheduling Mass coverage, condensing assets and missions, and managing the individual assets of each parish.

"As opposed to a plan for merging parishes and closing church buildings, this plan adopts an approach that strengthens and enlivens our current parishes," the document said. "By creating these teams, improved pastoral services can be provided to parishes without altering the parishes themselves."

Archdiocesan official developed the new pastoral plan over the course of the past 10 months to address declining church attendance, falling revenues, and shrinking numbers of new priests. Forty percent of parishes are unable to pay their bills, they said.