

Clergy shortage is a national challenge

The Archdiocese of Baltimore isn't alone in grappling with the challenge of fewer priests. Dioceses throughout the country are confronting the clergy shortage in ways that are having a direct impact on the faith life of Catholics in the pews.

Matthew Loveland, assistant professor of sociology at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, said bishops are exploring a wide variety of responses such as consolidating parishes, introducing pastoral life directors as parish leaders and assigning multiple parishes to single pastors. Those who are most successful are the ones who communicate with parishioners and involve them in the planning process, he said.

"It really goes a long way," said Loveland, who recently received a grant to study parish mergers in the Syracuse Diocese. "Catholics are well educated. They can look at the numbers and see that things can't stay the way they are. They want to be part of the decision-making process."

According to the Washington-based Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), there are currently 39,993 priests in the United States – down from 58,632 in 1965. The number of ordinations has dropped significantly from 994 in 1965 to 459 this year.

Although there are fewer priests, the number of Catholics has grown from 45.6 million in 1965 to 65.6 million today. The number of parishes grew from 17,637 in 1965 to 19,331 in 1995 before declining to 17,958 today.

"In the heyday, you could have four priests at a parish," Loveland said. "Now, parishes are struggling to have even one. That's not just a local trend. It's across the board and it's particularly bad in the Northeast and Midwest."

In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, there are 20 percent fewer priests today than 30 years ago. Of the 153 active priests, 72 will become eligible for retirement in the next 15 years. Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien projects that if the current trends hold, the number of active priests will be reduced to 100 in the next 15 years.

The archbishop has initiated a planning process that will look at ways of restructuring Mass schedules throughout the archdiocese to better account for fewer priests and fewer people attending Mass. He noted that only 30 percent of registered Catholics in the Archdiocese of Baltimore attend Sunday Mass.

Archbishop O'Brien has also called on all Catholics throughout the archdiocese to make a more concentrated effort at promoting vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

Nationally, Loveland noted that some bishops have taken advantage of a change in Canon Law in the 1980s that allowed them to appoint deacons, religious brothers and sisters or lay leaders as administrators of parishes. Pastoral life directors handle the day-to-day activities of the parish, while priests take care of sacramental duties.

According to CARA statistics, the number of pastoral life directors has ballooned to more than 517 from just 93 in 1985. There are six pastoral life directors in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

The challenge with that model, Loveland said, is that it often takes a priest out of the day-to-day functioning of a parish.

"Catholics like priests," he said. "It's an important part of what being Catholic is about."

There is a high risk of burnout in the pastoral life director's role, Loveland said. There is also the challenge of educating people for the ministry.

Loveland said other bishops are returning to a model that was common in the early days of the Catholic Church in America: assigning multiple parishes to a single priest. Some call it the "circuit-rider" approach, he said.

"One of the drawbacks with that is that when you get into rural areas where the parishes may be pretty far apart, it means a lot of travel time for the pastor," Loveland said. "It's harder to find a priest quickly because they're not residential."

Closing or consolidating parishes is the most emotional option that some bishops have employed. Closures are most likely to happen in dioceses where the bishop

believes each parish should be led by a priest, Loveland said. Some bishops have also turned to consolidation as part of a blended strategy that also uses pastoral life directors, clustering of parishes and multi-parish pastoring, he said.

“A parish is important for people,” Loveland said, “and, as you start to close them or change the way they are structured, it can affect how they feel not only about their leadership, but how they think about themselves as Catholics.”

Over the last several years, the Syracuse Diocese has begun a process of closing up to 40 parishes. The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis announced a strategic plan Oct. 16 that will reduce number of parishes in the archdiocese by 21 in the next several years. Last year, the Archdiocese of Boston announced plans to close 27 parishes and merge 41 others to form 18 new parishes.

Combining parishes can be a positive, Loveland said, because it presents the faithful with an opportunity to create a more vibrant parish than what may have previously existed.

“Whenever a decision is acted upon, there has to be a good, honest recognition that this is hard for people,” he said.

Above all, Loveland said, it is critical for bishops and other Catholic leaders to show a pastoral understanding for the changes the church is going through.

“People want pastoring,” he said. “They don’t want management.”