

# Dundalk-area parishes to unite under a single pastor

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Responding to the clergy shortage and changing demographics, four Dundalk-area parishes will unite under a single pastor by July 1, 2015, under a plan that will be submitted for the approval of Archbishop William E. Lori.

The affected parishes are Our Lady of Hope and St. Rita in Dundalk, St. Luke in Edgemere and Sacred Heart of Mary in Graceland Park.

As an interim step, Our Lady of Hope and St. Luke will be headed by one pastor and St. Rita and Sacred Heart of Mary by another beginning July 1, 2012.

Each of the parishes is currently headed by its own pastor or pastoral life director. Our Lady of Fatima in Baltimore, which is part of a regional cluster with the four Dundalk-area parishes, will continue to be staffed by the Redemptorists for at least the next four years and will work cooperatively with the other four parishes.

In a May 3 town hall meeting at Our Lady of Fatima, Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden said the plan developed by the committee could serve as a model for other parish clusters in the archdiocese.

Bishop Madden noted that there are currently 153 diocesan priests in active parish ministry. Within seven years, he said, 72 of them will be eligible for retirement as they reach age 70. The number of projected priestly ordinations will not be “in any way enough” to match the retirement rate, he said.

“We have been called at this time to have a new understanding of parish life,” Bishop Madden said. “We have been asked to think differently of church.”

The bishop emphasized that the “body of the church” is universal, noting that “no one parish is a primary means to obtain all of God’s grace.

“We need to respect the heritage, the history and the culture of a given parish,” he said, “and, yet, at the same time, to develop that wider vision of our church in East Baltimore.”

Bishop Madden said the laity is called to become more intricately involved in the life and mission of the church.

William Perry, chair of a sub-committee that studied pastoral models for the East Baltimore community, said the committee hopes an associate pastor will be assigned to the four parishes. The associate pastor would work in hospital chaplaincy at Bayview Medical Center and as a weekend assistant at the parishes.

Bishop Madden said the committee worked closely with the archdiocesan clergy personnel board as the plan was developed. He noted that the board initially wanted to move immediately to one pastor for the four parishes, but changed its viewpoint after concerns were raised by the planning committee.

"It shows you the influence your committee has," Bishop Madden said, "and how it is working together with the clergy personnel board."

During a question-and-answer session, several parishioners expressed concern about the future of Our Lady of Hope-St. Luke School - the last remaining Catholic elementary school in the Dundalk area. Committee members said the archdiocese has no intention of closing the school.

"It's important to say that we are very vigorously working on enrollment," said Father Kevin Farmer, temporary administrator of St. Luke.

School leaders hope the school reaches an enrollment of 200 and then build on it from there, he said.

Asked about the name of the school, Bishop Madden confirmed that discussions are underway about the possibility of renaming it to better reflect its status as a regional school.

Karen Gephardt, a member of the planning committee, told the Catholic Review she found the plan "encouraging."

"It's something that needs to happen," she said. "People have to look at church differently than they looked at it in the past as just their particular parish and what goes on there. If we have strengths that we can share with other parishes, then we can certainly share those strengths and make it a cohesive, strong community of worship."

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