

Five parishes in Anne Arundel plan for priest shortage

For a cluster of five parishes in northern Anne Arundel County, ironically, the future is now.

The staffs of Church of the Crucifixion, Glen Burnie; Holy Trinity, Glen Burnie; St. Philip Neri, Linthicum Heights; Church of the Good Shepherd, Glen Burnie; and St. Bernadette, Severn, are in the final months of a lengthy planning process for a situation they thought would occur in 2009, when projections indicated three priests would be available for five parishes.

But recently, the pastor of St. Bernadette resigned and the pastor of Crucifixion was transferred, leaving just three priests now.

"With the current circumstance of three pastors serving five parishes, this is the scenario we anticipated happening - it just occurred sooner than we expected," said Father J. Bruce Jarboe, pastor of Holy Trinity, which has about 2,500 households. "On the one hand, it put a slow-down in our planning process, but at the same time it has increased awareness of the need to be doing the planning we were doing."

"Luckily, we were already on top of it before these other developments happened," said Sister Constance "Connie" Gilder, S.S.J., assistant to the eastern vicar.

"It's manageable now," said Father John L. Kelly, pastor of Good Shepherd, which has about 500 families. "We'll adjust to it eventually."

Sister Connie said the planning began about three years ago, in response to "The Hope that Lies Before Us," an archdiocesan report on the allocation and recruitment of priests.

"We saw an opportunity to cluster those five parishes, and we've started," Sister Connie said. "Initially it was the pastors meeting and that was expanded to include staff, and I was asked to facilitate."

Sister Connie and Father Jarboe both said that no parish will be closed.

"One of the guiding principles is that each parish would retain its identity," Father Jarboe said.

"We don't want to close any parishes," Sister Connie said. "The premise was that they would remain intact, but not every parish would have a resident priest."

Originally, the staffs, pastoral councils and lay leaders of the five parishes hoped to complete their plans by February, but because of the departure of the two pastors, the final report won't be ready until May.

Priests are needed for Sunday and weekday Masses, for anointing of the sick, and for wedding and funeral Masses. Some sacramental celebrations can be done by deacons, and Father Jarboe said he expects deacons to be fully used.

But priests also need to be involved in all of the elements that make for a vibrant successful parish: worship life; faith formation and catechesis; social fellowship; stewardship; building and property management; human resources; and social outreach.

The planning process to address all of those areas has been an enjoyable one, said Father Kelly.

"It's been an extended process and has taken a few years," said Father Jarboe, "but participants ... agree it was pretty important to take the time to be thoughtful and build familiarity with each other."