

Many hands = lighter work

The Catholic Review

As the summer rolls on, I thought I'd offer an update on the recently-concluded consultations with parish lay leaders, which were aimed at helping me and our auxiliary bishops better understand the laity's opinions and ideas about how best to address the challenges facing our Church today and those which loom large for us tomorrow.

More specifically, I wanted their input as I wrestle with formulating a process that engages parishioners in the monumental task of charting a new course for Catholic ministry and Catholic parish life based on our desire for healthy and vibrant parishes, and an overarching responsibility to plan for a number of realities and projected realities, included among them:

- Shortage of active-duty priests and new priestly vocations
- Declining Mass attendance
- Aging churches and other parish structures
- Increasing number of parishes operating with a financial deficit

Chief among our challenges in addressing these real and unavoidable issues is the equally relevant fact that these parishes hold great meaning and significance for the people they serve (as they did for their ancestors) as well as the wider communities where they are located.

We have our work cut out for us, indeed, but we have no choice but to meet the task at hand head-on or we will abdicate our responsibility not only to be good stewards of the resources entrusted to us, but also to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with as many people as possible. We cannot do this if we have to spend each of the next several years reacting to crises that we would have avoided with some careful and thoughtful planning today!

That is where you come in, dear people of the Archdiocese.

We invited three members from every parish to attend a series of two meetings held at four locations throughout the Archdiocese: Columbia, Baltimore, Frederick and Fullerton. Each meeting lasted approximately two hours. The first was moderated and there were no priests or bishops present. We assigned participants to a table with 7-10 people from other parishes in the Archdiocese and asked them to deliberate on two assigned questions (one on substance, the other on process) from the following list:

1. What elements constitute a vibrant and sustainable parish? What measures can be used to determine whether a parish is thriving? What does a vibrant parish look like, feel like? What do you think should be done if a parish is not found to be financially sustainable?"
2. What should Catholics expect their parishes to provide and how should parishes meet the needs and expectations of their parishioners? Further, how can parishioners engage inactive Catholics? Please be specific.
3. How can parishes work together to help address the decreased availability of priests? How can parishes promote vocations to the priesthood? Please be specific.
4. Are you aware of examples where a parish has worked with another parish to utilize resources more efficiently—priests' time, finances, and/or combining activities/ministries?
5. As parish leaders, what concerns do you have about the future of the Archdiocese given the background information you were sent and heard this evening?
6. What are the values that should help shape the parish planning process?
7. What are your expectations for this planning process?
8. How can we assure that the laity are involved and informed throughout the planning process?
9. What should not be overlooked in any planning process undertaken to address the challenges facing the people and parishes of the Archdiocese?

Participants were asked to select a "reporter" to represent their table the following night, when Bishops Mitch Rozanski, Denis Madden and I would listen to their findings. Each table prepared notes that were transcribed and presented the second

night via PowerPoint (or flip chart) to assist those presenting as well as those listening to the presentations.

And based on the keen interest, robust participation and tremendously insightful input on display at these recent meetings, I am enthusiastic about our prospects for success.

For the record, not all of what I heard I agreed with, nor was it always pleasant to hear. But I did appreciate the honesty and the passion and the interest in improving our Church. And I hope those who participated appreciated and recognized my sincere desire to have them (and you) be a part of this process. As I said before each meeting, this is our Church and it is our responsibility to plan together for the future, whatever it may hold.

Clearly some tough decisions will have to be made. But, there should be no surprises. If we go about this process the right way, everyone invested in his or her parish and in our wider Church should know the issues being addressed, as well as what is being proposed as a solution to those issues. This will require a tremendous communication system to reach the many people who will be impacted by our work to try and improve our Church.

To that end, reports on all four sets of meetings have been compiled and are being sent this week to every priest and parish leader, as well as every participant so that further discussions can take place at the parish level.

Next week, I'll share in this space some of the most commonly heard suggestions and concerns expressed during the meetings, and offer some food for thought of my own.

I intend to use these insights, as well as those gleaned from my meetings and other correspondences with the wise and generous priests of the Archdiocese, to help shape a vision and a process for how we might proceed together in addressing the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.