

Now the *Real* Work Begins

It has been one year since I first wrote about the need for a plan that addresses the challenges facing our parishes and seizes opportunities to create more vibrant faith communities in our Archdiocese.

At our priests' convocation last fall many of the priests present voiced concerns about the aging presbyterate (72 of our 153 active-duty priests will become eligible for retirement over the next 15 years), the disparity in the rates of retirements versus ordinations of new priests, as well as the increasing duties being placed on parish priests, especially pastors.

Following that meeting the Priest Personnel Board presented me with a plan to address these issues and I remain most grateful for their diligent and thoughtful work.

While their plan sought to address the singular issue of the shortage of priests, it failed to account for many other factors that are preventing our parishes from more effectively fulfilling the mission Christ entrusted to our Church.

So we began looking at such factors as downward trends in Mass attendance, the impact of half-empty churches on the holy sacrifice of the Mass, the impact of aging church facilities, the need for greater coordination of Mass schedules by parishes in proximity to each other, and the decline in the number of men pursuing priestly vocations.

I spent a month this past summer, along with the auxiliary bishops, meeting with lay parish leaders throughout the Archdiocese. I had already heard from many priests in the Archdiocese and I wanted to hear from the laity. After all, whatever changes come will impact them as well as the clergy and I wanted their perspective represented. In particular, I wanted to hear their thoughts about what makes a parish vibrant and sustainable, how we can make better use of our priests and encourage new ones, how might parishes better work together to serve the same goals and what should be present in any process we create to address these issues.

That brings us to the present. As I wrote to you last month, I intend to embark on a

parish planning process in spite of my recent appointment as pro-grand master of the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem. The needs and the opportunities are too great to take no action. My successor will likely make the ultimate decisions, but at least we can begin gathering information, bringing parishes together to discuss the relevant issues, provide key information to parishioners and hopefully provide the next Archbishop of Baltimore with recommendations for moving forward.

To achieve these goals, I have taken the input I received from the many consultations over the past year and developed a process for parish planning in the Archdiocese: Building up the Body of Christ. This scripture, from Ephesians, aptly describes the mission of this process and will hopefully remind each of us involved of our true motivation.

The process involves four phases: Planning, Research and Organization; Work of the Parishes; Work of the Clusters; and Decisions and Implementation.

Phase I

Planning, Research and Organization

Phase I consists of all necessary research of demographic data, forecasting of future availability of priests, development of profiles for each parish, creation of metrics and assessment tools and the formulation of various potential parish models. It will also involve listening sessions with various stakeholders, a study of priestly vocations, and the development of evangelization and communication plans. This phase will begin immediately and much of the work will overlap with Phase II, which is slated to begin in January 2012.

Phase II

Work of the Parishes

Phase II consists of the identification by pastors/pastoral life directors of Parish Leadership Teams. These groups will consist of a pastor/PLD and four parishioners whose initial goal will be to review for accuracy parish profiles provided by the Archdiocese, inventory the ministries their parish currently performs, and prepare self-assessments. The work of Phase II is to be completed by September 2012.

Phase III

Work of the Clusters

Parishes will then work together in clusters, to be appointed by the Archbishop, in Phase III. A Cluster Planning Group, made up of the pastor/PLD and an equal number of lay representatives from each parish, will use the relevant data, including a forecast for priests to be available over a multi-year period, to recommend a plan, including the number of parishes needed, for its cluster. Before recommendations are made to the Archdiocesan Parish Planning Board, an advisory group of pastors and lay parishioners, these Cluster Planning Groups will communicate with the parishioners of their cluster in town-hall-style parish meetings. Facilitators will be used at the meeting for parishioners. The Planning Board will then make a preliminary recommendation regarding a model for each cluster, which it will send to the clusters. At that point, the Cluster Planning Groups will discuss the board's recommendation, a listening session will be held for parishioners in each cluster and the Cluster Planning Groups will meet again to prepare a formal response to the Planning Board.

Phase IV

Decisions and Implementation

The Planning Board will then make its final recommendation to the Archbishop who, in Phase IV, will announce final decisions on cluster models and plans.

The plan may appear to some as complex. It is my hope that the many hands that will be involved will make lighter the work and will infuse the collaborative spirit that has been yearned for by so many since we began the discussions that have led us to this point. It is worth noting, too, that we could have streamlined the process but doing so would have taken out much of the grassroots involvement that is vital to this initiative's success.

As with any significant planning operation, leadership and organization are key. I am counting on our two Vicar Bishops to support and help guide much of the planning process, especially in coordinating the work done at the parish and cluster level in their vicariates. I will continue to seek their advice throughout this process. I am also relying heavily on the newly created Office of Research and Planning, which will

conduct the necessary research and provide critical support to the Planning Board and to the participants in the parishes and clusters. The findings of this office will also be available to our Vicar Bishops. I have great confidence that this leadership team gives us the best hope for succeeding in this monumental initiative.

Another key factor in our success that was raised numerous times during the lay leader consultations was transparency/communication. To eliminate any communication gaps and to ensure that everyone is aware of the progress being made, we will use a newly created website, buildingupthebodyofchrist.org, to serve as a repository for vital information and a primary tool for communicating about the planning process. As well, quarterly updates will be provided to parishes for inclusion in bulletins and on parish websites. We will also utilize Facebook and Twitter to keep you abreast of developments throughout the process.

It is clear that this process will take time and will involve a great deal of research, collaborative planning and listening. It is critical that we move carefully and that we move together if we are to succeed in building a better Archdiocese. That said, we have a good number of churches whose viability is threatened by dire financial conditions, plagued by aging and declining populations and unmanageable physical plants. We also have a pressing need to reenergize our parishes to make them more attractive for our people -both active and inactive - to help them find a deeper and more meaningful relationship with Christ and the Catholic faith. Neither of these can wait and should animate our work as together we build up the body of Christ in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.