

Parishes work together in face of shortages

The 10 parishes in Harford County and the nearby Baltimore County parish of St. Stephen, Bradshaw, are planning how best to allocate not just priests, but the directors of religious education, youth ministers and pastoral associates who are in short supply.

The impetus to work together was “The Hope that Lies Before Us,” a report prepared a few years ago to address the projected priest shortage.

“One of the recommendations in that report was that groups of parishes do some planning,” said Monsignor G. Michael Schleupner, pastor of St. Margaret, Bel Air. “We decided rather than break into clusters, as some parishes have done, let’s see if we can tackle this together.”

The parishes, which are calling themselves the Harford Catholic Assembly, asked Sister Constance “Connie” Gilder, S.S.J., to facilitate their meetings. “So far we’ve had three assemblies, with a fourth one coming up in November,” said Monsignor Schleupner.

Sister Connie noted that 10 of the 11 parishes are staffed by a priest, with one, Prince of Peace, Edgewood, headed by a pastoral life director.

“There was a consensus from this group that it would be well to plan regionally,” Sister Connie said. “We were just doing this to deal with the diminishing numbers of priests, but we’re also dealing with the shortage in the pool of lay ecclesiastical leaders. The reality is we need trained personnel in parishes; we need knowledgeable trained catechists – we don’t want Aunt Mary doing that.”

The Harford parishes also will be affected by the base realignment and closure (BRAC) that will bring thousands of families to the area.

Sister Connie noted that by 2011, projections show having 11 priests for the Harford region. At the last assembly, attended by 85 people, she let them grapple with questions such as: Do we want one priest per parish? Is that the best use of talents?

Is it fair for a parish such as St. Margaret with 6,000 families to have the same number of priests as a small parish?

Those in attendance looked at five different models for parish leadership.

"We wanted the group to grapple with the complexities of trying to make the best use of priests," she said.

Father Samuel V. Young, pastor of St. Joan of Arc, Aberdeen, said, "I was a little skeptical at first because it was 11 parishes - it's a lot of people and a lot of different thoughts, but there's collaboration going on."

The priest numbers have made for easier planning, he said, since they've matched earlier projections, but no one quite knows what the impact of BRAC will be.

He praised the group for being proactive rather than reactive, and added that one concern is safeguarding the health of the priests as they minister to more with fewer in their ranks.

"We have not gotten down to brass tacks about recommendations, but eventually we will," Monsignor Schleupener said.

The assembly expects to make recommendations to the bishop by the end of 2008.

"I commend the parishes for working together and taking a realistic look at the future and helping to envision the form for that future," said Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, eastern vicar. "I encourage those parishes to continue their efforts in making that vision become a reality."

Deacon Paul Mann, coordinator for planning and council services for the eastern vicariate, said two other groups of parishes are in formal conversation about clustering for planning purposes.

In western Anne Arundel County, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Crofton, and Church of the Holy Apostles, Gambrills, are talking, but the situation is complicated by BRAC, which will bring thousands to the Fort Meade area.

The other group includes Holy Family, Davidsonville; Our Lady of Sorrows, Owensville; and Our Lady of Perpetual Help; Edgewater.

Four parishes in Baltimore County - St. Joseph, Fullerton; Immaculate Heart of Mary, Baynesville; St. Isaac Jogues, Carney; St. Ursula, Parkville - are in preliminary talks.

"A number of people assume you are going to close a parish or twin a parish or merge a parish," Deacon Mann said, "and that's not what this is about at all. It's about keeping a parish, and keeping a parish adequately staffed ... it's a moving target, but the issue isn't to close places."