

# Planning puts Mountain Maryland on solid footing

In this week's Catholic Review, you will read about a new parish forming in Western Maryland.

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien has approved a proposal to unite the five Cumberland-area parishes into a single faith community with one pastoral staff to be known as "Our Lady of the Mountains." The affected parishes are Ss. Peter and Paul, St. Mary and St. Patrick in Cumberland; St. Ambrose in Cresaptown and St. Patrick in Mount Savage. The new faith community will be led by Capuchin Franciscan priests.

Monsignor James Hannon, the longtime pastor of six parishes in Garrett and Allegany Counties - and the temporary pastor of St. Mary and St. Patrick in Cumberland and St. Patrick in Mount Savage - will be leaving Mountain Maryland to become the associate director of the clergy personnel office at the Catholic Center in Baltimore.

I recently asked Monsignor Hannon about the ongoing planning in Western Maryland and what he will miss about the region. His parishes include St. Michael, Frostburg; St. Ann, Grantsville; St. Joseph, Midland; St. Mary, Lonaconing; St. Peter, Westernport and St. Gabriel, Barton.

Monsignor Hannon gave such thoughtful responses that I thought I'd share them with you here.

*Q. With your upcoming appointment to the Catholic Center, you will be leaving Mountain Maryland after shepherding the area's parishes through a time of transition. As you look back, what was the biggest challenge in taking a more regional approach? What made it work?*

*A. I would say that the biggest challenge in taking a more regional approach was that first step for people to look beyond their own parish boundaries. I think that over the years parish leadership has promoted such a strong sense of "my parish" as a place, a locality that inspires loyalty that we sometimes have lost sight of the*

*idea that we are a larger church family. I believe that Catholics in our area have and are making that transition well. People are seeing that a regional approach offers life to our parishes – it is not a threat. Moving beyond familiar boundaries can be frightening – but once people do it – they begin to see a larger picture, and a positive picture of how our parishes will walk into the future emerges for them.*

*Q. Do you think the parishes of Mountain Maryland are well poised for the future? Is the organizational model effective?*

*A. Yes, I do think that the parishes of Mountain Maryland are well poised for the future – for a number of reasons:*

*1. Our parishes have been in a planning process over the course of a number for years. Parishioners are used to hearing and thinking in a “planning” mode. While actually changing can be challenging – the idea of change and the need for change are not new concepts to our people.*

*2. The approach that we have taken to our parishes working together is one that has the ability to adapt to even more changes as they are needed. For example – with the parishes that we call the “Mountain Maryland Six” – we recently had to re-do our weekend Mass schedule in order to accommodate only two priests serving the four weekend Mass sites. We met with the combined Pastoral Councils, Finance Committees and Corporators and talked out a suggested Mass schedule that would meet everyone’s needs. The new Mass schedule that emerged is one that is solid – it gives people choices and it allows the priests who will be celebrating Mass to go from church to church in such a way that they are not rushed. The priests can stay after Mass and greet people, perhaps even attend an after Mass social gathering – without feeling rushed. I believe that the revised Mass schedule for our MM6 parishes allows the priests to serve the people better – that is what it is about.*

*3. The organizational model is effective because it allows change as it is needed. The models that the Mountain Maryland Six is presently engaged in – and the model which the Cumberland parishes are moving into – may not be the same in 7 years. The overall model is one that allows us to look at the parishes, their needs, the population trends, – it allows us to ask the question, “What would be best for*

*our people at this time? How can we be better stewards of our gifts? How can we allow staff to really use their gifts to the good of the Church?" Rather than supporting a "status quo" and simply existing as we "always have" - we are encouraged to seek an organizational model that supports life in the parishes. While many of the changes that have been made in Mountain Maryland are to address a general decline in population over the years here, it is important that we frame the changes in terms of the goal. The goal is a lively Church - living parishes. Staying the same as we did in the past is not an option.*

*It is also important to note that the model that was proposed and accepted for the Cumberland area parishes address some administrative issues. Instead of 5 separate Pastoral Councils, Finance Committees, sets of corporators - now there will be ONE of each of these bodies. That approach will encourage UNITY - something that will serve the people of these sites in a better way. This model also allows the pastor and the parish leadership to work more efficiently for the good of all.*

**Monsignor Hannon also wanted to give credit to the many people involved in the planning process throughout Western Maryland. Deacon Charlie Hiebler, Dr. Tom Little and Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski were among them.**

*There are those from the Division of Facilities and Real Estate Management who have walked with us in assessing our buildings, making them safer, planning for work that needs to be done, looking at our cemeteries and their future, - Nolan McCoy, Hugh Andes, Matt Regan and David Owens have given us many hours of committed service to ensure the health of our parishes in this area.*

*Development - Greg Leitner has been our "go to guy" over the past years. He has been an immense help to me personally - and to our parish staffs as they have faced the need to address any number of areas of parish life that have been served by Greg and the Development people.*

*Human Resources - Regina McCurdy has been a real service to us on a number of occasions. Regina has helped most recently in the Cumberland parishes as they have and are maneuvering through the process of re-definition. She brings a calm*

*and respectful approach to staffing issues that have presented themselves. She has advise me and other pastors in our area in a way that shows that she sees her work as a service to the Church.*

*Fiscal offices – Ashley Conley has especially been helpful to our bookkeepers and to me as a pastor. Ashley has always been available to help in any way she can. John Matera has worked closely with our parish staffs in answering questions and being attentive to our needs.*

*Petra Phelps has helped our parish staffs to better understand employee benefits. She has worked with others at 320 to help our parish staff personnel maneuver changes and the information needed to know what those changes are about.*

*Chancery – Dr. Diane Barr has come to our area meetings of parish leadership, the regional planning commission and parishioners and has served us so well. She is a real teacher – and she has been able to bring clarity in answers to questions that have emerged as we walk into a future that brings up many uncertainties. She has taken the fear out of the unknown – and brought to light and focus to our work.*

*Communications Office – Sean Caine has worked to help us present the changes that are necessary in our area in a positive light. He has been a calm and reasoned voice in promoting the Church's voice on many important issues that are part of the lives of our own parishioners here in Mountain Maryland.*

*Evangelization – Since Fr. Hurley took on leadership of the Department of Evangelization – members of the “E-Team” have been available and generous in giving their time and interest! We have a member of TWO of the E-Team with us each month when the leadership of our parishes meet. They advise us and offer their expertise as we have gone through changes in our area.*

*Insurance – Tom Alban has served us so well over the years. If there is an accident, Tom is the guy we call. He is always re-assuring and has served us well in the past years. When St. Ann's had a fire some years ago – Tom was here, as were other members of the Archdiocesan offices, as we walked through that time and charted a future church for the St. Ann community.*

*As you can see, George – I think it is important that we name names of people who have been part of our own larger team. The notion of “team-work” includes those from the archdiocesan offices who have worked with us – and we are grateful for their service. They are part of why a new vision of parishes can work. I hope that my own work might break down the “Us vs. Them” mentality that sometimes is present. Giving credit to those who have really been present to us is part of that effort.*

*Q. What are you going to miss about Mountain Maryland?*

*A. That is an easy question to answer – THE PEOPLE! The people of the parishes I have served are wonderful, good people. For so many – their connection to the parishes transcends their own generation – it goes back in time to past generations when their own ancestors settled in the area. The many smaller towns that make up Mountain Maryland have a rich and beautiful history – and our Catholic Church is a vibrant part of that history. Their ancestors built these churches. Their ancestors worshipped in these buildings that represent so much to them. Given this connection to the past – it is all the more impressive that so many of our parishioners are able to look beyond their own local parish to see a church that needs to embrace change. It is this ability that will ensure that our parishes will be vibrant into the future.*

*Mountain Maryland has been home to me for some years. I will, I know – be “home sick” for a while. I have been blessed by some wonderful friendships over the years – ones that I know will continue to be a blessing. I will certainly make it a point to visit often – and to return to be refreshed and re-energized by the people and places that have been an important part of my life these past years.*