

We Hear You

The Catholic Review

Last week, I updated you on the consultations that have taken place this summer to guide the development of a process for parish planning in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Bishops Denis J. Madden and Mitchell T. Rozanski and I found the four consultations with lay parish leaders to be very revealing, as parishioners from across the Archdiocese responded with their perceptions and ideas about a host of related issues.

In furtherance of our commitment to transparency throughout this process, I provide this summary of the prevailing themes to emerge from these very helpful sessions. It should be noted that the format of these meetings precluded any discussion. We were strictly there to listen, an enormously beneficial exercise given the wealth of ideas, passion and enthusiasm in our parishes.

Vibrant and Sustainable Parishes

A number of broad categories emerged from the discussion on what constitutes a vibrant and sustainable parish with clear consensus that the following elements are essential: Mass/Liturgy; Sacramental Life; Sense of Community; Encouragement of Diversity; Evangelization; Faith Formation; Youth and Young Adult Ministries; Community Service/Outreach; Parish Leadership; Communication; and Stewardship.

Participants emphasized the importance of having good Mass attendance, as well as an inspiring liturgy with full participation, relevant homilies and a strong music ministry. Access to the sacraments is seen as a key component of any parish. A vibrant parish must have a welcoming atmosphere that fosters communication and relationships among parishioners, and should celebrate and encourage diversity by offering a variety of liturgical styles, activities and ministries, as well as Masses in different languages when necessary.

Lay leaders said that evangelization efforts need to be visible both inside and outside the church, with a special focus on how to engage inactive Catholics. A vibrant parish has robust religious education, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) and continuing adult formation programs, as well as active service ministries in the form of pastoral care for parishioners and in outreach to the surrounding community. Participants urged parishes to recruit and train laity to form an active volunteer base – another important measure of vibrancy – and suggested developing a database of parishioner skill sets. Additionally, youth and young adult ministries should be active and engaging with solid leadership, and should be treated as core ministries of the church.

In addition to the various ministries and services that are integral to parish life, lay leaders stressed the necessity of effective leadership, communication and stewardship at the parish level. Parishes need pastors to be strong spiritual leaders as well as have adequate management, leadership and interpersonal skills. To this end, participants suggested priests and seminarians should be trained accordingly and reviews should be conducted to help balance how priests are performing and how their time is spent.

Effective leadership also encompasses an active pastoral council and committees, and a parish mission statement providing a shared vision and common goals. It was also recommended that parishes proactively identify strengths and weaknesses by performing internal assessments, and that they develop parish strategic plans. Some suggested that the Archdiocese of Baltimore could help these efforts by developing guidelines and providing support for strategic planning at the parish level.

Open lines of communication between the Archdiocese, pastors and parishioners are likewise important to good parish health. It was recommended that communication efforts on the parish level include an engaging web presence – specifically utilizing the various social networking tools currently available.

Participants acknowledged that good stewardship requires a sense of ownership among parishioners and that a sustainable parish must have adequate resources – including facilities that are well-maintained, safe and updated, and sufficient collections and revenue to keep the parish financially sound. Some expressed

concern about Cathedraticum (the assessment each parish is required by Canon Law to contribute toward the operation of our Central Services offices) and it was suggested that the Archdiocese consider forgiving past Cathedraticum debt for poor parishes.

Priest Shortage

Participants also addressed questions and voiced concerns about the number of available priests and about the allotment of spiritual versus administrative duties being performed by them. Many believe that there is a need to maximize the time priests have for sacramental and catechetical duties. At the same time, parishioners felt that parishes should focus on the recruitment and training of lay leaders, recruitment to the permanent diaconate, and inter-parish sharing of personnel, such as business managers and directors of religious education, to help minimize the administrative burden on pastors and priests. Some said there is also a need to better define the possible roles of the laity and provide clarity about limitations as well as measures to enhance their involvement.

Understanding that priests perform many duties that are not visible to parishioners, it was recommended that the Archdiocese raise awareness of behind-the-scenes work of pastors and what those responsibilities are beyond Sunday Mass. It also became clear in the discussion that there is a need to increase the understanding among the laity of priest assignments, particularly non-parish priests and their roles in the Archdiocese.

Vocations

Connected with the discussion on numbers of priests and their workload is the question of how best to increase their numbers. Lay leaders had numerous thoughts and suggestions related to this issue, including:

- Focusing evangelization efforts on youths and young adults, and nurturing a greater awareness of the priesthood as a viable career choice;
- Marketing vocations to be a more attractive career choice, thereby increasing the encouragement and support provided by parents;
- Utilizing Catholic schools and faith formation programs as potential feeders

for vocations;

- Helping priests and seminarians recognize the central role they play in encouraging vocations, especially through homilies and seminarian involvement with parishes, particularly with the youth population;
- Ensuring parishes use activities such as retreats, vocation nights, vocation prayer groups, outreach and field trips to seminaries as a way of promoting vocations;
- Sharing by the Archdiocese whatever recruitment efforts are happening behind the scenes, and offering guidance as to how parishes can help support these efforts on the ground level.

Inter-parish Collaboration

Recognizing the value of collaboration, many examples emerged from the discussion on how parishes can work together for a more efficient use of resources: coordinating and/or reducing Mass schedules to promote full and vibrant liturgies; joint liturgical and faith sharing initiatives such as reconciliation services, Eucharistic adoration, and missions; joint ministries such as adult faith formation, RCIA, children's religious education, youth ministry and service initiatives; shared parish resources and personnel. Participants also promoted opportunities for financial collaboration (e.g., shared purchasing power and combined fundraising efforts). The cooperation of parish leadership – pastors, councils and committees – is critical to the success of any such collaborative efforts.

A number of participants spoke specifically about developing a model for managing parish collaboration. Suggestions included forming regional networks with the help of the Archdiocese to share resources and ideas across parishes, and examining the best practices of successful models both within and outside our Archdiocese. Some lay leaders spoke about the necessity for openness among parishioners to new parish models, including mergers and closures. Some voiced concerns about the potential impact of parish mergers or closures, especially in city neighborhoods where parishes are viewed as stabilizing presences.

Values and Expectations for the Process

Lay leaders believed that Christian values should be predominant in shaping the

parish planning process, and all efforts should be characterized by a spirit of collaboration, inclusiveness and evangelization. Changing demographics throughout the Archdiocese should not be overlooked – in particular the growing Hispanic population in many areas – and the diversity in parish communities should be celebrated and marketed.

In recognizing the need to make decisions based on stewardship, fiscal responsibility and best business practices (at both the Archdiocesan and parish levels), participants cautioned against decision-making based solely on these factors. Creativity, flexibility and open-mindedness were frequently cited as important elements that should not be overlooked in the planning process. Planners were encouraged to “think outside the box” and also take into consideration the differences between communities, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach, and preserving unique parish identities where possible.

Keeping the Laity Informed and Involved

A prevailing theme in all meetings was communication. Participants in every session called for openness and transparency, calling them critical to the success of a planning effort. Participants expressed their gratitude for their inclusion in the process thus far and asked for regular updates – including pulpit announcements, parish bulletin notices, newspaper articles and online content – going forward. The process should be marked by transparency – sharing critical information such as trends, data, financial status and the criteria for determining viability – as well as authenticity, with assurance that the decisions are not already made, they said.

Indeed, lay leaders widely agreed that parishioners need to be invited to be part of the solution to ensure global buy-in of stakeholders. This will require two-way dialogue throughout the process, welcoming feedback from parishioners through councils, town hall meetings, web forums, focus groups and/or surveys. Such efforts, they said, will be necessary to address the natural resistance to change and to promote good change management throughout the planning process.

My response to these and other comments received to-date: we hear you! And we want to continue to hear from you. We will continue to find ways to provide updated information throughout this process and I encourage you to continue to monitor

these pages, the Archdiocesan website and, of course, your own parish.