



Archdiocesan Pastoral Council meeting
Monday, June 17 via Zoom
Meeting notes

Present: Archbishop William E. Lori, Mr. James Conway, Mr. Andrew Likoudis, Ms. Elaine McCubbin, Ms. Uju Okwesili, Ms. Consuelo Petro, Mr. Emory Plitt, Ms. Annalynne Reddington, Ms. Lee Anne Santiago, Mr. Larry Simmons and Mr. Alexander Wright.

Excused: Mr. Michael Chorabik Jr., Ms. Gloria Olivares and Ms. Agnes Nepomuceno.

Guests: Bishop Bruce Lewandowski, Monsignor Jay O'Connor, Ms. Yvonne Wenger, Mrs. Melissa Freymann, Deacon John Schmidt and Ms. Marcie Gibbons

Bishop Bruce Lewandowski called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. He offered a greeting and led the group in prayer.

Topics Addressed

I. Seek the City to Come

Bishop Lewandowski outlined the final decision of the Seek the City to Come initiative. After two years of praying, collecting data, analyzing information, envisioning and planning, the Church in Baltimore City and the immediate suburbs will form 23 parishes with 30 worship sites. The implementation phase has begun with various updates planned for the next 1 to 3 months, 4 to 6 months and 6 to 12 months. Pastors of the newly formed parishes will be announced on July 1 and the parishes will celebrate their first Masses on December 1.

The newly formed parishes will be Sacramental hubs, spiritual homes and distinct entities that will be created from parishes that will be merged together. This new parish will be a fresh start for all of the faithful who will come together to worship, determining ministry roles together and, in some cases, renaming the church. Finances will also be a factor for newly formed parishes that will combine physical assets and debts of parishes that are merged. Assets include investments, buildings and endowments. This means that any future revenue derived from the sale of land and parish buildings (including churches) will belong to the new parish after debts are settled. This approach is required by the Church law. Because these assets and monies are only owned by the parishes, these funds do not flow to the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Next steps include meetings between pastors and transition teams to discuss staffing, Mass schedules and outreach to neighborhoods. The transition teams will address all aspects of forming the new parishes, including ministries, facilities, fundraising and more.

Bishop Lewandowski updated the group to let them know Geri Royale Byrd, who helped lead the Seek the City to Come process alongside him, has been appointed as chief of staff to Maryland Lt. Gov. Aruna Miller. He said Ms. Byrd left a lasting and positive impression on the Church and thanked her for her service.

The Church in the City is dedicated to missionary outreach and the formation of missionary disciples. Bishop Lewandowski said the goal of Seek the City was not to determine if – but how – the Church would continue its mission of bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to all.

Archbishop Lori said the sweeping initiative incorporated the input of 6,000 voices and was steered by 250 people that were part of the working group. While difficult, the decisions to advance the Church in Baltimore were necessary. Taking no such action was no longer an option. The process was made stronger by the exhaustive efforts to receive public comment after the initial proposal was released.

He pointed back to the earlier decision to reorganize Catholic schools. With fewer schools, the Archdiocese now has more students and is better able to deliver a Christ-centered, academically-excellent education.

The Archbishop said the aim going forward is to ensure the newly formed parishes will have all of the services a parish ought to offer with a renewed sense of evangelization and services to the neighborhood where the parish is based. The Archdiocese will support pastors and parish communities as the implementation phase unfolds.

Discussion with Members

Mr. Conway called the process “wonderfully done,” although he fears the final plan does not provide enough worship space across Baltimore with each newly formed parish to cover an expansive territory. He is concerned about transportation for the faithful, especially those who live in central West Baltimore and the Johns Hopkins corridor in East Baltimore.

Ms. Okwesili echoed this concern, particularly in the case of older parishioners.

Bishop Lewandowski said the Seek the City working group made up of 250 parish leaders conducted mapping exercises that looked at bus routes, sidewalks and accessibility as part of their deliberation. Going forward, a key priority of the transition teams will be to help parishioners find worship sites that are accessible to and comfortable for them.

Ms. Santiago relayed information about her experience in Western Maryland when five parishes formed one as Divine Mercy Parish. She said transportation and new routines were a big concern, and in the immediate months, after the parish mergers, some parishioners, especially those who were older, did stop attending Masses and participating in the life of the parish. Over time, however, she said many did return after taking time to adapt to the changes.

Archbishop Lori said Mountain Maryland has led the way for the Archdiocese and offers a promising story of renewal for the Church in the City.

Judge Plitt said looking geographically at the map of the city and the placement of the newly formed parishes shows good balance. He thinks nostalgia and routines will be difficult for some to overcome during their period of adjustment.

Mr. Simmons said the goal leading up to the first Masses in the newly formed parishes on December 1 should be broad outreach to invite all to join.

Archbishop Lori said the intention is to make every effort possible to welcome people to the newly formed parishes. He emphasized that the newly formed parishes will be new parishes where everyone who joins from the merging parishes will be on “equal footing.”

Monsignor O’Connor said sister parishes based in the counties that are tied to city parishes are also part of Seek the City to Come. The sister parishes are called to build relationships, visit one another and share resources that have shown success in evangelization.

Judge Wright called the moment an “exciting change” that will bring unity to the Church.

The Archbishop said his pastoral letters, “Light Brightly Visible” and “Light Brightly Visible 2.0,” set an overarching vision for evangelization throughout the Archdiocese – not just the churches in Baltimore City but across the nine counties, too.

II. Mental Wellness Ministry

Archbishop Lori welcomed the next presenters: Melissa Freymann is a clinical mental health therapist and a member of the pastoral counseling center at St. John the Evangelist in Severna Park. She is helping to lead the Archdiocese’s Mental Wellness Ministry. Also joining her are Deacon John Schmidt of St. Ignatius in Frederick and Marcie Gibbons, a guidance counselor at Archbishop Spalding High School; they are both founding members of the ministry working group.

The Archbishop said he just returned from a meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops wherein Church leadership emphasized the importance of mental health awareness ministries. The Archdiocese of Baltimore launched its work in earnest in 2020 during the pandemic. The latest effort of the local Church was the St. Dymphna retreat in May at the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg.

Mrs. Freymann said the St. Dymphna retreat was a tremendously meaningful experience for those who attended. The theme of the day was summarized by Bishop Lewandowski’s homily message, “You are not alone.” There was significant demand and a large waiting list. The retreat is part of Phase 2 of the Archdiocese’s Mental Wellness Ministry which will also include efforts to foster parish-based ministries and update the list of resources on the Help is Here landing page, as well as cultivating additional resources for pastors and parishes.

She offered details on Mental Wellness Ministry. She emphasized that such ministries do not provide professional therapy, nor does the creation of the ministries involving training people to become mental health professionals. Instead, such ministries connect parishioners with resources, accompany one another through difficult circumstances and offer prayer.

Catholics have led the way in service through the establishment of hospitals, schools, social services organization and countless ministries, Freymann said. Responding to the urgent needs of the day for mental health support is no different.

Deacon Schmidt, who is a clinical psychologist with the U.S. Navy, said parishioners from his home parish, St. Ignatius in Frederick, attended the St. Dymphna retreat and left inspired to start a ministry. Marcie Gibbons said Phase 2 follows the Archdiocese's work to train 1,000 people in Mental Health First Aid in 2022. She asked those in the virtual meeting to discuss how concerned they are about mental health in their communities.

Ms. McCubbin said while mental wellness is a concern, she wonders how successful the ministry can be given the reluctance that some may have talking about their situations. She expressed concern for the stigma involved. Ms. Gibbons said participation in a ministry is completely voluntary with a goal to make anyone interested feel comfortable and supported. Deacon Schmidt said some people may not consider a parish to be a place to support their mental health needs, but he says he believes parish communities can and should be a place to where people can find great support and resources.

Judge Wright said many in our society feel great stress and have an unmet need to access support. Such ministries are needed.

Archbishop Lori said pastoral needs are immense. He said true evangelization is about meeting real needs and bringing the Kingdom of God into reality in people's lives. The Church must be meeting contemporary needs by inviting people to find better mental health by connecting with the source of their wholeness.

Ms. Okwesili said, as a psychiatric nurse, she wonders how the ministries can be effective if they don't engage mental health professionals in the ministries. Ms. Gibbons said resources would vary by parishes and the Archdiocese's Help is Here website could serve as guide. The Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers provides a framework.

Discussion with Members

III. Closing prayer

Archbishop Lori offered closing remarks, including a brief update on the Chapter 11 reorganization. He said he has met with the committee of survivors and mediation is to begin in the coming weeks. The May 31 "bar date" for claims has recently passed and the Archdiocese is collecting information on the filings.

Additionally, this month, he said he will ordain six men to the priesthood. The class of seminarians is the largest in decades.

He led the group in prayer and the meeting concluded.