

Young adults play a role in parish planning

By Matt Palmer

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Dozens of young adults came to the Catholic Center, the Archdiocese of Baltimore's headquarters, Jan. 29 for a parish planning listening session.

The gathering was the latest in a series of listening sessions hosted by the archdiocese, but the first to engage younger audiences specifically.

The archdiocese has been going through the process as the number of new priests has dwindled, along with some parish memberships and Mass attendance. During the next 15 years, almost half of the current 153 active priests will be eligible for retirement, according to Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, who was present.

Cardinal-designate Edwin F. O'Brien started the parish planning process a year ago when he was archbishop of Baltimore. He was appointed Grand Knight of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem during the summer of 2011, which meant he would leave the archdiocese for Rome. He has been apostolic administrator since his appointment.

During a Jan. 25 press conference, he said he hoped his successor will be installed by the middle of March.

"I can assure you that what we have started will be carried through," the cardinal-

designate said. “There is nothing we’re doing now, in terms of our parish planning ... that any incoming archbishop won’t be delighted with. We are making no decisions, but we’re getting facts together. That is, I think, the biggest favor we can do for an incoming archbishop. Great progress is being made.”

Listening sessions are the first of four phases, Bishop Rozanski told the young adults Jan. 29. Phase two will include parishes doing self-analysis in order to see how they can work with other parishes. The third phase addresses cluster planning for sharing clergy and staffs among parishes. The fourth phase will be giving the plan to the new archbishop, who can make alterations.

Bishop Rozanski said the archdiocese is ordaining about three new priests a year.

“It doesn’t add up that we’re replacing the numbers that are retiring,” he said.

Currently, in twinned or consolidated parishes, 16 pastors are leading those 42 parishes.

According to Bishop Rozanski, Mass attendance in the archdiocese has fallen 18 percent since 2006. He said average Mass attendance throughout the archdiocese is 233 people and added that about 22 percent of Catholics attend Sunday Mass.

The bishop said archdiocesan planning contains information from parishes, as well as from state and local governments.

“As you know, we’ve had great demographic shifts in our archdiocese and people have moved all over the place,” he said. “We’re a much more mobile society. Some place where they had a school, a parish church, a convent and a rectory, they’re not using all of those buildings.”

He said that between 2000 and 2010, there was a “152 percent” increase in the

Latino population inside the archdiocese as well. Half of parishes are operating at a deficit caused by a decline in offertory. Twenty-seven of the 150 parishes were not able to pay their cathedraticum or their insurance during the course of the year.

Bishop Rozanski said the archdiocese is looking at those factors in an effort to find ways to best minister to parishes and each other without over-burdening current priests and staffs.

“What we feel is important is that we have a pastoral plan for the entire archdiocese,” he said. “It’s a very large undertaking.”

Young adults made recommendations that parishes use social media, hosting events to watch professional sports together and communicating more. Some Latino young adults said that transportation to local parishes is often difficult.

Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden told the young adults that “we all benefited greatly by the input you all offered tonight.”

He said he was impressed by their openness and seriousness in addressing the issue of long-term planning.

“If you have a listening session and you ask people to offer an opinion, that puts a challenge to us to listen,” Bishop Madden said. “What you had to offer tonight was very uplifting.”