

Planning

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For parishes currently in the planning process, new priest appointments will carry the title of "administrator" rather than "pastor." That status will remain intact until the planning process determines whether a parish is likely to retain a priest over a six-year period, the term for a pastor.

In addition to planning at the parish level, Pickett noted that the Pastoral Office is undergoing its own planning process. Some of the pastoral center's primary goals, he said, are to expand hands-on service and increase its rapport with the parishes.

"We need to improve communication in what has been a highly decentralized operation — and we have the technology to do it," Pickett said. He explained that computer communication is not fully utilized because many priests and parish staff members aren't familiar with using modern technology and may balk at learning how.

In addition, Pickett said, diocesan officials hope to create more "field representative" positions: Pastoral center employees would work in particular regions, rather than out of the diocesan offices on Buffalo Road in Rochester.

Creative changes

Tompkins County has taken some innovative approaches to its planning process. According to Richard Galik, planning team chairperson, the seven faith communities plan to hire a youth ministry coordinator to oversee current volunteers, recruit other youth ministers in the county and coordinate countywide youth events.

In addition, the Tompkins group plans to combat the priest shortage by increasing recruitment of foreign priests who may wish to study at such area colleges as Cornell University.

A youth coordinator position is also being planned for the western Livingston County group. Father Daniel Condon, pastor of St. Patrick's Church in Mount Morris and Holy Angels Church in Nunda, added that his planning group plans to hire a pastoral minister to coordinate visiting and social ministry.

That group has also devised a system where parishioners would donate 1 percent of weekend collections toward a contingency fund. Father Condon said that the money could be used, for example, to cover an unanticipated repair to a church building.

Northwest Monroe County plans to pool some of its financial resources as well. Bob Prorok, planning team chair, said that parishes will take up an annual collection to support the migrant Hispanic community based in Brockport, one of the eight faith communities in the group.



In addition, the northwest Monroe County group is seeking to form a young adult ministry board. Prorok said that the planning group had originally wanted to hire a full-time young adult coordinator, but felt that the area would be too difficult to cover.

"We didn't think it would be possible to have one person scrambling all over this huge geographic area putting programs together," said Prorok, a parishioner at St. Mark's Church in Greece.

Whereas these areas are moving toward concrete changes by this summer, not all 1997 planning groups have felt the need for such aggressive planning. Bridget Blanchard, planning team chair for western Wayne County, said that the staffing stability of her group's parishes meant that little immediate change is required.

"We don't think there will be much of a change until 2000 — but definitely after that. We assume we won't have as many priests then," said Blanchard, a parishioner at St. Patrick's Church in Macedon.

Painful reality

While the potential of additional funding and lay staffing has factored into many parts of the planning process, the same cannot be said for priest staffing.

This reality is most painful in southern Cayuga County. Currently, two priests are celebrating a total of seven weekend Masses in six different churches. According to Pickett, the diocesan Priest Personnel Board has deemed that there would only be one priest available — to celebrate three weekend Masses — five years from now. Be-

cause these churches average only 75 people per weekend Mass and are spread over a wide geographic area, Pickett said that at least one church closing is inevitable.

"It's kind of clear where they've got to head to," Pickett said.

Due to the implications of this situation, southern Cayuga planning team chair Debbie Patrick said her planning group has asked for, and been granted, an extension to conduct further discussions.

"Some of our parish committees required additional information and work sessions before they could make recommendations to the planning group," Patrick said. She declined further comment, saying that the parishioners were not yet aware of the recommendations.

Patrick is a parishioner in the four-church Cayuga Team Ministry cluster which includes St. Patrick's Church, Aurora; St. Joseph's, Cayuga; Our Lady of the Lake, King Ferry; and St. Michael's, Union Springs. The other affected parishes are St. Patrick's, Moravia; and St. Bernard's, Scioto Center.

Pickett said that southern Cayuga is the only 1997 grouping in which at least one church is likely to close in the near future. However, this possibility was also raised in northeast Rochester during planning discussions last year.

Father Robert O'Neill, pastor at Church of the Annunciation, had felt that financial resources would have increased — allowing more staff members to be hired — if at least one of the churches in his five-parish planning group had closed.

"There were two schools of thought. (But) most of the people want to keep things as they are, and that's what they're doing," Father O'Neill said.

Other churches in the northeast Rochester grouping include St. Stanislaus; St. George; St. Andrew and St. Philip Neri.

Two other sets of parishes have decided to cluster this year. In the southern Livingston/northern Steuben region, four churches will cluster and be served by two priests. This move was precipitated because Father Paul Schnacky, pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Wayland, will retire this year and not be replaced.

Instead, St. Joseph's will join with St. Pius V, Cohocton; Sacred Heart, Perkinsville; and St. Mary's, Dansville. Those three churches are currently staffed by two priests.

And in Tioga County, Father William Moorby, pastor of St. John the Evangelist in Newark Valley and St. Francis of Assisi Church in Catatonk, is expected to add St. Patrick's Church in Owego to his pastorate as those three churches form a cluster.

Father Moorby has been administrator of St. Patrick's since last June, when Father Eugene Weis left St. Patrick's for a sabbatical and did not return to the parish.

Attitude adjustments

Pickett remarked that planning groups as a whole seem more cognizant of the difficulties brought on by the priest shortage, and are therefore more willing to embrace the process than they were a year ago.

"They are no longer frightened, saying, 'Oh, we're not going to have enough priests,'" Pickett said. "Maybe five years ago, people would have thought that a priest shortage was the end of the world. Now they'd welcome a sacramental minister."

Pickett credited the planning teams for their diligence in moving forward.

"I had not anticipated the strength of the lay leadership," Pickett said.

Galik said that his Tompkins County group functioned smoothly due to a prevailing attitude that each faith community would have to undergo a certain amount of unpleasant change.

"It's a consensus document. It doesn't mean everyone is going to walk away from this thrilled, but it was something we could live with," said Galik, a parishioner at St. Catherine of Siena Church in Ithaca.

Father John Hayes agreed that open-mindedness has fueled cohesiveness among the Tompkins County faith communities.

"People didn't get caught up too much in territorialism. It wasn't a case of, 'We're not going to participate; it's us or nobody,'" said Father Hayes, administrator of Holy Cross Church in Dryden.

The key adjustment in upcoming years, Father Condon remarked, is for more and more parishes to thrive in the absence of a resident priest.

"The paradigm that has to change is that a residential pastor is indicative of the health of a parish," Father Condon said.

Father Condon added that the planning process does not mean that parishes in his region need to lose their individual flavor.

"We're not looking at creating a 'super-parish,'" Father Condon commented.

Galik in Tompkins County agreed, saying, "We have to maintain those identities, even as we combine programs."

Pickett observed that this is really only the beginning of a five-year process, so many proposed changes won't be as overwhelming as some parishioners might fear.

"It's not like people will wake up July 1, 1998, and the world is going to be totally different than it was on June 30," Pickett said.

However, Prorok did point out that the landscape will be considerably different for northwest Monroe County by 2002.

"We have no specific programs beginning July 1, but the process will begin," Prorok added. "I don't think the members of our community will see significant changes July 1, but if they look back five years from now, then they will see changes — hopefully for the better."

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