

Key issues

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a lot of listening. I see young Mormon missionaries walking the streets, and I say, 'Why aren't we doing that?'"

Father Tomasso added that his planning groups hope to follow the example of city "storefront" churches and their approach to their community.

"We could learn from their welcoming, their accessibility, their going door-to-door," Father Tomasso said.

As a whole, Pickett said, planning groups that emphasize evangelization are taking a compassionate approach.

"They're not finding fault with people who have fallen away, but they're raising an awareness. There are many Catholics in the community who don't come to church, and we need to ask ourselves why they don't come. It's not them who have to change — it's how do we change," Pickett said.

Gene Oberst, chair of Rochester's City East planning group, said that the changing times have made evangelization a major issue among all five parishes in his group — Church of the Annunciation; St. Andrew's; St. George's; St. Philip Neri; and St. Stanislaus. The group, which also includes Rochester General Hospital, is due to begin implementation July 1 following meetings this past year.

"The neighborhood has changed; you don't have the percentage of Catholics that you did 20 or 30 years ago," Oberst remarked. "To keep the parishes vibrant, you have to keep up the numbers."

Oberst, a parishioner at St. Andrew's Church, said his parish has worked diligently in recent years to visit more homes of fallen-away Catholics and other non-parishioners in its neighborhood. The City East planning group, he remarked, is anxious to implement similar efforts by forming an evangelization committee.

"I think we have more in common than we had previously guessed," Oberst said.

Reaching out

Common ground was also a priority in northwest Monroe County, where seven suburban parishes are increasing outreach efforts with the Western Monroe/Orleans Hispanic Ministry. That group comprises St. Mark and St. Lawrence in Greece; Na-

tivity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Newman Community in Brockport; St. Leo in Hilton; St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Hamlin; and St. John the Evangelist in Spencerport. It will begin its implementation July 1.

Everett Hobart, a volunteer with the Western Monroe/Orleans Hispanics, said his ministry felt very much an equal partner at planning meetings.

"People listened to us — even though our concerns are quite different, obviously, than your typical parish experience," Hobart said.

Hobart noted that formation of the northwest Monroe County planning group enabled the Hispanic ministry to communicate its needs to a wider region. He explained that the group has allowed representatives from the Hispanic ministry to visit member churches — to generate funds and volunteers — on a regular basis.

"The big piece of the process was having our ministry recognized among the area parishes. They didn't know we existed," Hobart said. "People were completely oblivious to what was going on, and this (ministry) is right in their back yard."

Getting the word out

Communication was equally vital in the northern Steuben group, where all four churches will cluster as of July 1. The Holy Family Catholic Community will comprise St. Mary's Church in Dansville (which is actually located in southern Livingston County); St. Joseph's, Wayland; Sacred Heart, Perkinsville; and St. Pius V, Cohocton.

Father Stephen Kraus, pastor of St. Mary's in Dansville, said that planning updates have been regularly distributed at all four churches throughout the process.

"We were extremely conscious of good communication to the parishes involved. We did not release any information that was not written down and given on the same weekend at all the churches," said Father Kraus, who will become pastor of the Holy Family cluster.

Father Kraus said that such communication will be especially vital while implementation of the cluster brings about restaffing and reductions in Masses scheduled.

Another proponent of strong communication, Pickett noted, was the western Wayne County group, due to begin imple-

mentation July 1. The group has regularly distributed news releases to area newspapers, explaining the planning process and featuring each of the group's faith communities: Church of the Epiphany, Sodus; St. Rose, Sodus Point; St. Anne, Palmyra; St. Gregory, Marion; St. Mary of the Lake, Ontario; St. Michael, Newark; and St. Patrick, Macedon.

Pickett added that other diocesan groups have discussed the possibility of initiating joint calendars and church bulletins. Communication of this kind is vital, he said, because parishes are still not used to maintaining regular contact with each other.

"For many of these groups, as they moved their meeting sites around, it was the first time they'd been in the other parishes," Pickett acknowledged.

Targeting the young

Spreading out to a wider community is not limited to the older adult population, Pickett added. He said that the planning process is encouraging youths and young adults to expand their boundaries as well; for instance, the northwest Monroe County group plans to form a young adult advisory committee.

Several planning groups targeted young adults, Pickett said, because they recognized that this age group — though potentially vital to parish life — often falls through the cracks.

"The churches have traditionally not had anything for young adults. Many are missing in action," Pickett remarked.

Pickett added that combining members of different parishes can strengthen young adult and youth ministries. He cited Rochester's City East group as an example.

"They're saying that the number of young people in each parish is too small, but if they put them together they'll have the kind of numbers they need to have a successful program," Pickett said.

However, Father Kraus said that parishes must approach assimilation initiatives among young people with caution.

"How do youths who serve on opposing sports teams relate to each other in a (church) cluster? It's a real challenge which remains to be seen," Father Kraus said. "We haven't quite decided what to do on the youth issue."

Yet Dan Wensel, chair of the northern

Steuben group, said that a paid youth minister is part of the cluster's long-range goals.

"It's a need we know we have," said Wensel, parishioner at Sacred Heart in Perkinsville.

Joining forces

In order to provide centralized services within its planning group, the Holy Family cluster envisions a model in which one youth minister overlooks a team of volunteers at the parish level. This model has been explored not only in the northern Steuben group, but also by planning groups addressing youth-ministry needs in Tompkins and western Livingston counties.

Michael Theisen, diocesan coordinator of youth ministry, said that this team approach — rather than a hands-on style — makes sense when a youth minister is designated to serve more than one parish.

"We did not have a lot of success in the past when youth ministers were hired for two or more parishes. They were expected to serve almost as if they were hired just for the individual parishes," Theisen said. "But now, the parishes are planning on a broader scale so their expectations are different."

The northern Steuben cluster will also combine its service efforts by hiring a part-time business manager for all four churches this summer. Business duties were previously handled by parish secretaries, according to Wensel. He added that in order to minimize any hard feelings about favoritism, the new hire will be somebody who is not a parishioner or employee at any of the cluster's churches.

Other examples of consolidation include the Flower City group in Rochester, which plans to hire a central business manager, and the Tioga Region group, which seeks to develop a pastoral support center that would train lay staff members and volunteers for member parishes. Both planning groups are scheduled to begin implementation July 1.

Father Tomasso maintained that such innovation, though departing from recent tradition, should reflect the enthusiasm in which the Catholic faith was founded.

"We're not as willing, now, to fit into the structure we know, but to be creative and take risks," Father Tomasso said. "I believe firmly that is what the early church was, and we've got to regain it."

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