



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

William Pickett, Diocese of Rochester Director of Pastoral Planning, has been overseeing Pastoral Planning for the New Millennium.

Story by Mike Latona

What kind of church do we want to be as we enter into the new millennium?

That was the question Bishop Matthew H. Clark raised in his December 1996 vision statement launching Pastoral Planning for the New Millennium, the diocesan initiative to encourage all faith communities to prepare for the future.

In the statement, Bishop Clark went on to describe his own vision of a church community that was faith-filled, welcoming and "ready to wrestle with the difficult issues of the day."

"Trusting that such a vision is no idle dream but the very promise of the Gospel," the bishop concluded, "I challenge our local church, in the spirit of the Synod, to work with me in making plans to move us toward this ideal."

The first fruits of that challenge are being realized this year as 12 groups of parishes and faith communities are submitting to the diocese the five-year pastoral plans they developed during 1997-98. The remaining 23 such groups in the diocese are to submit plans in the coming three years.

These plans are intended to detail how local faith communities will work together in light of changing resources and, in particular, the decreasing numbers of priests.

According to the diocesan Office of Priest Personnel, 180 full-time diocesan priests served 200 faith communities as of June 1997. William Pickett, diocesan director of pastoral planning, estimated that this number will shrink by at least 18 priests over the next five years. This reduction is the result of scheduled retirements and does not include priests who may die or take leaves of absence during that period.

The plans are also designed to embrace the intent of the four goals that emerged from the 1993 diocesan Synod. The goals are to promote growth in: lifelong faith formation; the consistent life ethic; the role of women in the church and society; and small Christian communities.

"To honor our Synod priorities, we must honor, in the best way, the resources with which we are blessed," Bishop Clark stated in a letter in a June 26, 1997, *Catholic Courier* special section on pastoral planning. "I invite you to consider becoming involved as your parish assesses itself and identifies priorities for the next several years, and works with neighbors on common concerns."

A look back ... and forward

The process has involved five key stages up to this point:

1) In late 1996, the diocesan Strategic Planning Committee was formed to advise on creation of the pastoral planning process. This group included 32 diocesan officials and parish leaders.

2) In April 1997, Pickett was appointed the diocese's first director of pastoral planning.

3) Also in April 1997, 35 groups of faith communities were created to conduct planning during assigned years between 1997 and 2000. Most of the faith communities are parishes, but the groups also include campus and prison ministries; hospital chapels; migrant communities; and communities of women religious. Most groups consist of four to eight faith communities.

4) In June of 1997, 12 planning groups began collaborative efforts. Fourteen more groups will convene this month, following individual parish-level meetings that took place over the past several months. Eight groups will then collaborate in 1999, and one in 2000. Planning groups consist of pastors, staff members and parishioners.

5) Implementation of approved plans developed by the first 12 groups was to begin in July 1998.

The first step in the process for each individual faith community is to form a committee of staff and parishioners who begin by scrutinizing needs within their own parish. The parish committee identifies those needs based on several "vitality indicators" listed in guidelines developed by the diocesan Strategic Planning Committee.

These indicators include timeliness of bill-paying; stability of reserve funds; the parish's success in such fundraising efforts as the Thanks Giving Appeal; and advancement of Synod goals. From these findings, the parish committee identifies three to five "priority issues" for its faith community to address over the next five years.

The parish then shares these issues with the other

parishes in its group. From there, the multi-parish group develops collaborative activities to address common priorities, and prepares a joint proposal based on its findings. Most of the efforts involve ministry programs and staffing, with a particular emphasis on sharing of resources. Finally, the group submits its draft plan to the diocesan Office of Pastoral Planning.

As the drafts are being developed, Pickett provides feedback to the groups. He said that a plan may require revision, for instance, if it includes some violation of diocesan policy or church law. In addition, he noted, plans may also be revised if they require diocesan funding that is not available.

Once the plans are affirmed by Bishop Clark, the involved faith communities are to begin implementing them at the start of the next parish and diocesan fiscal year, which begins July 1.

For example, the 1997 planning groups were due to begin their five-year implementation phase this July 1. Similar timetables will apply to groups that are beginning their planning processes in 1998 and 1999.

Although Bishop Clark does not become directly involved in most aspects of these plans, he is required by church law to issue final approval when the plans seek a change in canonical status — such as a parish dissolution or the creation of a new parish.

Pickett said the planning process is proceeding on schedule for the vast majority of the 1997 planning groups. All the 1997 groups are expected to begin implementation by September 1998, at the latest.

"Everybody's ended up in a slightly different place, but they're all good places," Pickett said. "People have devoted time and quality energy to the process, so groups have made progress. It's not easy work, but people have really taken it seriously."

In addition to planning at the parish level, the Pastoral Center is undergoing its own planning process, commonly referred to as "Plan B." The diocesan Office of Pastoral Planning submitted a Plan B recommendation to Bishop Clark on May 18.

Some of the priorities in Plan B include increased interaction between Bishop Clark and parishes; an enhanced communications strategy for the Pastoral Center; improved training for Pastoral Center and parish staffs; investment in technology; and diocesan support for the pastoral plans of planning groups.