

Tioga

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St. Patrick, Owego

resource — his process knowledge, availability and openness," said Orth, a member of St. John's.

The planning team first addressed the priority issues each parish designated during self-assessments in August and September.

"It was kind of surprising to see that for the larger and smaller churches, many issues were the same," Parmarter said. Among those issues were decision making, education and staffing.

The four sub-teams were formed in October, each charged with developing recommendations regarding its particular area. Eventually a drafting committee consolidated the recommendations.

The planning group worked by consensus — a process that took a long time in many cases.

"We call this in the Catholic Church 'getting purgatory points,'" Orth said with a laugh.

Members said choosing their wording frequently bogged them down, as did trying to include too many details in their recommendations. One sticking point, for example, centered on how to meet the bishop's request that no priest celebrate more than three weekend Masses.

Team members said the plan they developed is completely their own.

"I don't think anyone handed us a script," said Janet Swinnich of St. Pius X. "The only thing we were told was we should be able to count on no reduction in priests (within the next) five years."

The cornerstone of the group's planning was a vision statement it developed early in the process. "We tested everything against the vision statement," Parmarter said.

The vision statement recognized that:

- the parishes share a common purpose;
- each parish has its own identity;
- the priests have a sense of belonging and contributing to their parishes;
- parishioners have quality and satisfying faith experiences; and
- the parishes have a strong collaborative relationship with the diocese, with a sense of interdependence.

The planners built on key assumptions. Two were that the diocese will continue to assign four priests to the region for the next five years (although it is likely the number of priests will decline in the subsequent five years) and that no church in the region will close.

The biggest change proposed by the group's final draft is the clustering of St. Patrick, St. John and St. Francis parishes. The three are to share a pastor, parochial vicar, permanent deacon and secretary. It also recommends forming a Regional Pastoral Council with representatives from each church, and a Pastoral Support Center to provide resources for pastoral programs.

"Sharing a priest is nothing new to the people of St. Francis," observed Parmarter, who has been a parishioner there for 25 years. "All my time here, we've shared a priest with someone else."

The distance between the six churches challenges their ability to collaborate, however, he noted. It's at least 15 miles between St. Francis and St. James, for example.

Thomas Doty, a planning group member and lifelong member of St. Patrick's said, "If you look at a map, we're not like Monroe County. We're a rural county, with 50,000 people in the whole county."

Tioga is the most southeastern of the Rochester Diocese's 12 counties, and a drive of more than two hours from Rochester.

Because parishioners generally haven't visited each other's churches, the communications sub-team designed posters for each church. Each poster displayed pictures of the six churches and a map.

Another communications initiative involved distribution of bulletin inserts in February that updated parishioners on the planning done since June 1997.

In April the communications sub-group, chaired by Katherine Haeling, detailed the planning group's latest draft in three bulletin inserts, and team members spoke at some of the churches. In May the team sought feedback from the churches' parishioners, hearing mainly an appreciation of the plan.

The team now hopes Bishop Matthew H. Clark will give their efforts his approval after he meets with the group June 15 at St. Margaret Mary Parish.

The plan not only outlines changes to occur during the next five years, but also lists a few "ongoing considerations." These include the fact the plan may have to be modified if a key assumption changes and the notion that parishes should be prepared for ongoing change, including a possible consideration of expanding the proposed cluster.

"A major step is to continue this planning process," Doty noted, "and the mechanism will be with the Regional Planning Council. The next year we will still be looking at five years out."

City

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approved by Bishop Matthew H. Clark.

Group members said the plan's most immediate effect will be on the weekend Mass schedule in the three parishes. Within five years or less, the plan calls for the three parishes to share two full-time priests and one half-time priest.

Each parish will have its own pastor, but at least one parish's pastor will be the half-time priest. Given that he is also a diocesan vicar general, Father Mulligan noted that he will probably be the half-time priest in the new arrangement, although the details of this set-up have not been formally discussed among the parishes, he said.

Bishop Clark has asked that priests celebrate no more than three weekend Masses in order to ensure their quality. Hence, with only three priests serving the parishes, the plan calls for the combined number of weekend Masses being celebrated at the three parishes to drop from the current 12 to nine.

Cindy Blair, who represented Most Precious Blood on the planning group, said the parishes will have to work out the Mass schedules together. On its face, the solution might seem simple — three priests, three Masses per parish. But, she said that might not be the ultimate arrangement because of the population differences between the parishes.

"Somebody might want to give up a Mass," she said.

The Flower City/Lexington Group's plan also outlines the creation of cooperative structures for the parishes in religious education, finance and social ministry. Each parish will contribute representatives to committees overseeing these areas, while retaining their own separate committees on them.

The parishes also agreed to hire a common business director by July 1999, and common religious education and social ministry directors by mid-2000. The parishes will need to come up

with \$158,000 to meet the salary needs of these new hires, the plan said, but the plan leaves open whether that will mean some current staff will be laid off or have their hours cut back.

Of course, many questions remain unanswered about these new arrangements, planning group representatives said.

For example, how, exactly, will the parishes divvy up collection-plate income when parishioners from each parish start attending each other's Masses? Hare said separate parish envelopes would help solve the problem, but he and the other representatives agreed that many Catholics don't use envelopes.

And the plan also points out the parishes must determine what portion of the new employees' salaries each parish will pay.

"These are delicate problems for which the joint finance committee and business manager must recommend equitable solutions to the parish councils," the plan states.

The plan also outlines a number of "cost-free, satisfying and enriching collaborative experiences."

For example, the plan suggests common retreats, shared adult Bible-study groups, and encouragement of volunteers from all three parishes to visit the sick and the homebound, regardless of the parish to which they belong.

Planning group representatives said that the parishes have already been cooperating to varying degrees in such areas as social ministry and sacramental preparation. Additionally, the parishes held a common retreat at Sacred Heart this past Lent during which each parish's pastor introduced himself.

Meanwhile, members of the parishes' religious education and social ministry teams have already begun meeting, Father Mull said. He also noted that the parishes' priests are already plugging each others' gaps in sacramental duties.

For the plan to work, the representatives knew they had to deal with the concerns of parishioners who wanted to retain their separate parish identities.

"We didn't see any compelling reason to close a parish or merge," Hare said. He added that all three parishes also will retain their own parish councils, and that the parishes had decided against forming a three-parish council. However, he said, representatives from the separate councils will meet together regularly.

Indeed, rather than emphasize what the parishes will have to give up in the future, the plan outlines incremental steps the parishes can take through the year 2002 that will gradually meld their pastoral, social and catechetical lives.

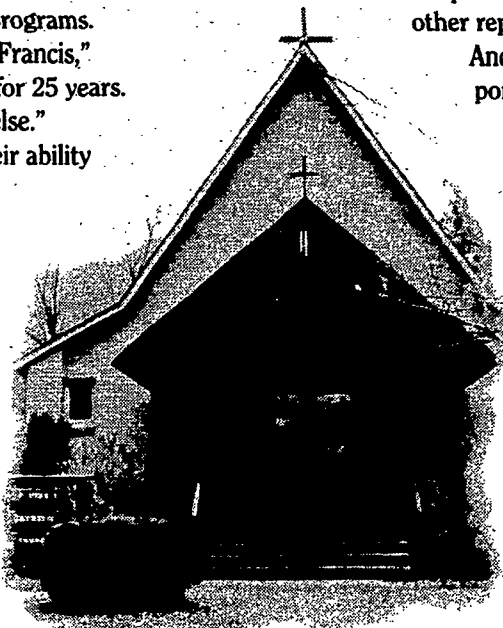
"If you immediately started cutting up, taking out, and making drastic changes, people are going to resist, and there's going to be a backlash," Blair said.

Davis put it another way.

"This isn't like restructuring Kodak," she said. "We believe this is the living body of Christ here. Ultimately, it's God who will move this forward."



St. James, Waverly



St. Pius X, Van Etten