

SPECIAL REPORT

Bishop discusses diocese of past, present, future

Introduction

It is good to be with you this morning. In my 22 years as your Bishop, we have taken many journeys together. I cannot imagine a group of people with whom I would rather journey than the people of this Diocese. As we begin our next phase of pastoral planning, it is appropriate that we step back and see from where we have come, what we have learned, and on which paths we might set our feet for the future.

Diocesan values

Our 1993 Diocesan Synod clarified our diocesan mission and values. The mission spoke to us about our goals, but the values spoke to us about the character of our life together. As we continue our journey of faith, the following values continue to guide us:

- To be a collaborative Church
- To call forth lay leadership
- To utilize fully the richness of our diversity
- To be open, trusting and respectful in our dialogue with one another, and
- To engage in ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue and cooperation

Our pastoral planning process fit us well because it reflected these diocesan values in such a radical way. Pastoral Planning for the New Millennium was a grass roots process that valued the role of local communities and, as a result, required much of these local communities. I thank all those who dedicated themselves to this important task — from lay leaders to pastoral ministers-religious, laypersons, deacons — to faithful priests.

The results of their work and the ongoing story of their implementation are well documented on the pastoral planning web site. We are truly blessed with the People of God of the Diocese of Rochester.

What we have learned

As with any major project, Pastoral Planning for the New Millennium taught us a great deal about our local Church. The process reinforced some things we already knew. Others were surprises. You received a handout that elaborates the major findings of this first round of pastoral planning. Let me now just list some of the conclusions reached by our pastoral planning department after the focus groups and evaluation of the past year.

1. We were affirmed in our belief that involvement and feedback from the local level were essential in devising effective pastoral plans.
2. At the same time, we learned that appropriate direction and support from the diocese were needed to carry out this ambitious planning process.
3. We were reminded again that the involvement and leadership of lay people were essential to the success of this process.
4. We learned the importance of dealing with reality — based on accurate information and projections — and not living in the past or future.
5. We have sharpened our understanding of the nature of church.
6. We learned, and need to acknowledge, that we have just begun to address some of the unmet pastoral needs identified through the first round of pastoral planning.
7. We came to appreciate that the first round of pastoral planning was primarily about building relationships and the infrastructure of collaboration.

As I reviewed the very fine work done by Bill Pickett, Karen Rinefierd, and Casey Lopata, it all resonated with me. We have learned a lot, and we have much more to learn. I have been privileged to be with all but one of the 35 planning groups as they celebrated the



David Wallace/Photo intern

Bishop Matthew H. Clark signs an autograph for Chuck Territo, a parishioner of St. Mark's in Greece, during the lunch hour of Planning Group Leadership Day at St. Mary's School in Waterloo, March 31.

(W)e must work out ways in which all our parishes — urban, suburban, and rural — reflect a unity of concern and action on behalf of all. This may require those blessed with great material resources to share their richness with those who struggle; it may require that those who struggle receive assistance graciously. This will require of all a humility and empathy of spirit that will shine as an example of how we are to be church in our time and in our place.

completion of their process and began their collaboration. That wonderful experience helped me gain an appreciation for the issues and challenges faced by our parishes and faith communities. While the parishes and faith communities share many commonalities, there are important differences and thus different challenges. Let me share with you some of my reflections on parishes in three different settings.

Urban parishes

Though there are exceptions, parishes in older, central areas of our cities face almost overwhelming circumstances. Typically both the overall and the Catholic population of the area is declining. Churches that once reverberated with the joyous faith of a thousand people are, compared to those earlier days, now nearly silent and nearly empty. Where once there were families and multiple generations, there are now the elderly and those who drive in from their suburban homes. Even when congregations are composed of multigenerational families, they are struggling with the injustices of our society and economy that make it difficult to maintain a humane quality of life. The human and financial resources of these parishes are simply not sufficient to support a ministry and pastoral program adequate to the needs of the congregation and those who live within the parish.

Suburban parishes

As the inner core of our cities declines, new residences are built in suburban and ex-urban areas. The impact on suburban parishes is clear. Though our overall diocesan population growth is far below the national average, we have parishes that are grappling with the problem of overwhelming growth. Our largest single parishes now exceed 3000

families and are located in areas where future population growth will outpace the average for our area.

Physical expansion of worship space and increased pastoral programming to meet these needs pose significant problems. Gradually, even our largest parishes are losing the services of parochial vicars. We need to find ways to reduce the workload of pastors, and not by merely shifting more responsibilities to already overworked staff members.

Conversely, some suburban communities — in fact most of those in the first ring outside the city — are already beginning to experience the decline in population that has created issues for urban parishes. This is especially evident in the increasing age of parishioners and the pastoral needs associated with that phenomenon.

Rural parishes

Except for those feeling the impact of the migration from cities and near-city suburbs, rural parishes are also dealing with declining and aging populations. It is difficult for these parishes to support the ministries needed by their communities with a declining population and financial base. Even when it becomes apparent that the best solution is to combine into a single parish, or at least reduce the number of worship sites, there is often no site than can physically accommodate the larger community resulting from consolidation. Parishes that need to reduce their number of Masses often also face facility limits.

As it becomes increasingly likely that we will need to reduce the number of parishes or worship sites that we can support with priests, we worry about losing the Catholic presence in a local community. Our local geography and weather — as well as the aging population — make the possibility of having to drive longer distances to worship quite difficult. Those parishes that are growing because of out-migration are also facing daunting facilities challenges as they become swamped with new parishioners.

What we have learned is that our concern must not be with the numbers of priests, Masses or worship sites, but rather with the quality and vitality of parishes and faith communities. We can always figure out solutions to our quantitative and structural problems. What does matter most is the quality and vitality of our lives together in the Lord that creates the companionship and mutual love required to take the risks of a Christian life of service to others.

Where we are headed: a look at 2025

As an aside, I must note that for me this is all theoretical.

The projection from CARA, the Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate at Georgetown University, indicates that the Diocese will have 64 active priests by 2025, a decline of 60 percent from our current level. This projection is based on assumptions about ordinations, incardinations, mortality, and retirement age. Even considering a fairly extensive use of priests from outside the diocese, it still seems very likely that there will be only 64 active priests in 25 years. We have also learned that the number of active priests is not always the relevant number, since there will always be a few whose services are needed in, or better suited to, roles other than pastor.

While this may seem disastrous, and certainly not a future I would choose, I think we should remember that 25 years ago, in 1975, we had some 325 active priests. If we had forecast then that we would have 160 active priests in 2000, we probably would have called that a disaster. Yet, the vitality of many of our parishes demonstrates how our local church has quite successfully dealt with this change. Based on that experience, I am deeply confident we can do so again.

Given the underlying population increases projected for the 12 counties of the Diocese, the number of Catholics will increase 3.2 percent by 2030. In approximate terms, this means that the Diocese will go from one priest per 800 registered households to one priest per 2000 registered households. Currently the Diocese has one priest per parish. If the number of parishes stays constant, there will be one priest per 2.5 parishes. Think of your own parish and your own planning group. What will it mean to you when we have one priest for 2000 households — not 2000 people but 2000 households? How should the faith communities in your planning group be structured if they have half as many priests assigned as they do today — or perhaps even fewer? Currently, if each priest were saying three Masses of Sunday obligation, there would be a total of 450 Eucharists each weekend. By 2025, there would be a total of only 180 Eucharistic liturgies. Given the likelihood that at least 30 parishes will need to have two or more Masses, this means there will be parishes that will not be able to have regular Sunday Eucharist. And supposing that the present physical capacity of churches in the Diocese doesn't change, there will likely be a sizeable number of parishes without regular Sunday Eucharist.

Effective planning for the next five years must take these longer-term projections into account. I have asked the Priest Personnel Board to develop a strategy that responds to the longer-term future. We know for sure that we cannot continue as we are in the face of this pending change. Diocesan policies with regard to priests, assignment of pastoral leaders, building expansion, sacramental celebrations, among other issues, need to respond to this future reality. Pastoral Planning for the New Millennium is part of that response, but so too are the changes taking place in the assignment of pastoral leaders to parishes.

Beginning with this current round of pastoral assignments, all pastoral leadership openings are open to both priests who have completed six years of pastoral service, and to any pastoral administrator or anyone in the pastoral administrator pool. My preference and heart-felt desire, as you know, is to assign a priest pastor to each of our parishes. This, unfortunately, is not possible in our current circumstances. Already a priest pastor without responsibility for another parish leads less than 50 percent of our parishes. More than a third of our

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