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Planning

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"We're beginning to hit that wall," he commented, saying that the diocese will face much more critical challenges due to the priest shortage over the next five years.

Comparatively, the first round of planning has been largely "getting to know you, with less on hard changes," said Casey Lopata, the diocesan planning office's other liaison.

However, Pickett said, "We're going to get more explicit and tighten the constraints," stating that churches will face reductions in their Mass schedules and that limits will be placed on how many churches a pastor can oversee at once.

Priests are indeed becoming responsible for larger chunks of territory. All of the following configurations have emerged since pastoral planning began:

In southern Cayuga County, one full-time pastor serves a six-church parish. In southern Livingston/northern Steuben counties, one full-time diocesan priest and one extern priest serve four churches. In southern Steuben County, one full-time priest serves four churches. In the Finger Lakes, one full-time priest and two externs cover six churches. In Corning-Painted Post, a pastoral administrator leads a four-church cluster. On the city of Rochester's west side, one full-time priest was the pastor of four churches until St. Francis of Assisi Parish closed in 2000.

The next round of pastoral planning will include a much higher number of externs — priests not from this diocese — and pastoral administrators. These two models of leadership and sacramental support were only used scantly in this diocese until the last two years. According to diocesan officials, there are currently 25 extern priests serving in the diocese and 21 people either serving, or available for duty, as pastoral administrators.

However, Pickett warned, parishes must not assume that either model will serve as solutions to the lack of available diocesan priests.

"Let's not kid ourselves and think we have an endless supply of pastoral administrators. And with externs, very few become incardinated (formally made diocesan priests)," Pickett said.

Planning-group representatives met with Bishop Matthew H. Clark and other diocesan officials on March 31 at St. Mary's School in Waterloo, to review the planning process to date and plot what lies ahead. During Bishop Clark's keynote address (which ran in its entirety in the April 5 Catholic Courier), he cited statistics from Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate. CARA, Bishop Clark reported, has projected there will be 64 active priests in the Rochester Diocese by 2025 — a drop of 60 percent from the current total of 160.

Some priests will not be counted on to handle the rigors of running a large parish, Pickett pointed out. "One thing that's become clear is the quality of life for aging priests. We're being very careful and respectful; we don't want to have situations that would be unhealthy for them," he said.

Rinefierd had high marks for the planning-group representatives who attended Planning Group Leadership Day, saying they have "a willingness to deal with a hard reality."

How the process will be carried out, in terms of concrete results, is still an unknown, Pickett said. He likened pastoral planning to a prize fighter, saying, "Every fighter plans, and then he gets hit. Or every military leader plans, and then the battle begins."

Rather than be able to follow their plans rigidly, Lopata said, planning groups are "really being faithful to the spirit of the plans."
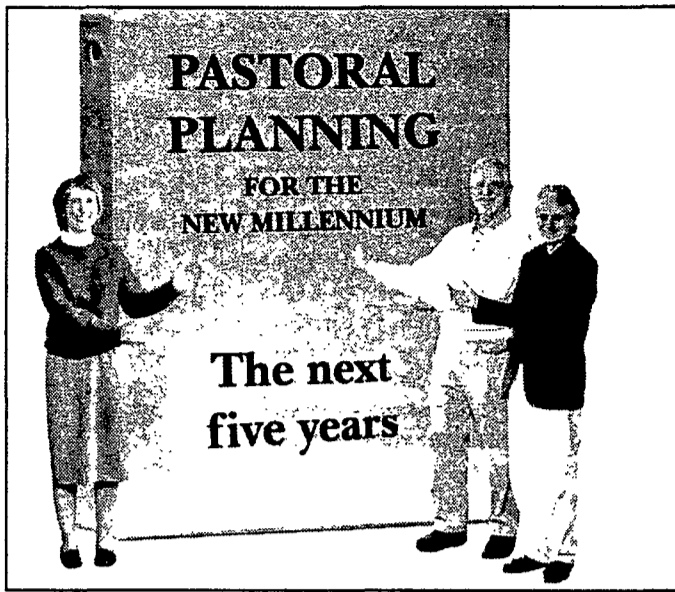
Because these issues are so weighty, planning groups stressed the need for ongoing communication between themselves, and Bishop Clark and other diocesan officials. Many in attendance said they value the work of Rinefierd, who began her liaison position in 1999; and Lopata, who began in 2000. Rinefierd and Lopata serve as advocates for the 35 planning groups and, collectively, have visited with each group.

Another major issue at the planning conference was ensuring good communication within each parish. This process, Lopata said, involves "parish leadership, parish staff, planning council, parish council and parishioners."

Yet no matter how well these plans are publicized, Lopata, Rinefierd and Pickett agreed that parishes will still struggle when major changes take place. "They understand much more when it impacts them directly," Rinefierd remarked. Such examples of this impact would be when a parish no longer has a pastor; reduces its Mass schedule; clusters with other churches; or closes.

Struggles for survival

Closing, of course, is the most jarring result of all. Though Pickett, Lopata and Rinefierd presented numerous alternatives that could keep a church open in some capacity (outlined in the story below) during Planning Group Leadership Day, they also alluded to the possibility of church closings over the next five years.

"There's no bias for closing parishes," Pickett said. "(But) say we came up in a year and didn't have enough priests for assignments, well, that's a reality."

Pickett also said that closings would be a distinct possibility in a situation where one priest is responsible for five parishes and is struggling to maintain his canonical limit of celebrating no more than three Masses of Sunday obligation. Such situations are likely to surface more frequently in the upcoming five-year planning cycle, he said.

"A plan will have to respond to that reality, which is much more explicit than last time," Pickett said.

Bishop Clark, also, alluded to the possibility of closings in his March 31 keynote address, saying, "At some point, we will have to ask the question: If we cannot support all parishes, which ones will no longer be supported?"

Since pastoral planning began in 1997, four diocesan churches have been closed: Rochester's St. Theresa, in 1997; Elmira's St. Cecilia and St. John the Baptist, in 1998; and Rochester's St. Francis of Assisi, 2000.

Should further closings lie ahead, Rinefierd noted that they would come gradually — as opposed to the experiences of such dioceses and archdioceses as Milwaukee, Detroit, Louisville and Pittsburgh, where churches have been closed in bunches over the last 15 years.

"I don't think we're going to get to the point where the bishop says that 25 parishes will close. This is not our style," Rine-

(From left) Karen Rinefierd, Casey Lopata and Bill Pickett of the diocesan Office of Planning.

fierd said.

Although Bishop Clark has the final say on these matters, he has expressed a desire that such conclusions first be reached at the local level. Yet Father Robert Schrader, pastor of St. Mary's Church in Auburn, pointed out that planning groups have struggled mightily on this issue already.

"Groups have had a hard time recommending that one of their own parishes close. I don't know if any pastoral-planning group actually came up with such a recommendation," Father Schrader stated at Planning Group Leadership Day. "Who will do that, if they don't, is a question that needs to be addressed."

Churches of the future may have much different appearance

The definition of a parish, as we know it, stands to become widely scrambled in upcoming years.

Several alternative versions — some of which already exist in the Rochester Diocese — were raised at Planning Group Leadership Day on March 31. Diocesan planning leaders stated that the scenarios "are not meant to be accurate predictions of the future but rather to help us think in concrete detail about the future toward which the church is moving."

The models were presented by Bill Pickett, diocesan director of planning; and Casey Lopata and Karen Rinefierd, planning liaisons. They are:

• **Mega church.** A reduced number of eucharistic services would take place in larger worship spaces, not necessarily churches — worship facilities that could accommodate 1,500-plus people. Smaller parishes would be eliminated, but the buildings would possibly continue as "ministry sites."

• **Priest availability increases.** With a successful result from vocations awareness efforts, and/or a broader eligibility standard for ordination, the diocese would have enough priests so that no parish had to close and each parish had one full-time resident priest.

• **Third World model.** This model is currently used in South America, where a priest has pastoral responsibility for a set of parishes. The priest presides at a single church, while lay volunteers and professional lay ministers lead the other faith communities. The priest only celebrates Sunday Mass at his home church, and Liturgies of the Word are offered in the other faith communities.

• **Rotation model.** This was enacted in 1999 by the Southern Cayuga Planning Group, which combined six churches into a single parish, the Good Shepherd Catholic Community. One full-time priest pastor (Father Brian Jeffers) and sacramental ministers rotate liturgies among the six buildings, meaning that some buildings go weeks or months without a Sunday Mass. Parishioners either attend a Liturgy of the Word or watch televised Mass if they cannot, or choose not to, travel to the scheduled Mass site. In its first year, the cluster experienced at drop in Mass attendance of slightly under 10 percent while collections remained about the same.

• **Priestless parishes.** For more than 100 years, Korea continued Catholicism without priests while missionaries, who had introduced the Catholic faith there, were barred from the country.

Similarly, as the number of priests declines, more people will be gathering on their own for spiritual sharing and ministry in which no priest is involved.

• **Televangelism.** The decline in priests may also cause worshipers to rely on media for their spiritual formation and worship experience. And, computer technology now allows for the possibility of "virtual" communities to form over the Internet, supplementing worshipers' face-to-face faith experience.

• **Networked parish.** One person serves as pastoral leader of a geographically based group of parishes. The parishes move toward becoming a single civil and canonical corporation, with the parish supporting as many worship sites as possible. For instance, the Tioga Planning Group has proposed becoming a six-church parish with a pastor and two parochial vicars. And, the Corning-Painted Post planning group has a pastoral administrator and two sacramental ministers supporting four parishes that have proposed to become a single parish.

• **Hybrid model.** This was begun in 2000 by the Northwestern Ontario County planning group. One priest, Father Doug Della Pietra, serves as a parish sacramental minister and also coordinates hospital, jail, nursing home and hospice pastoral care.

• **Team ministry.** A parish or cluster operates with co-pastors, co-pastoral administrators, or an administrative team headed by a parish. Co-pastorates have existed in the Rochester Diocese although there are none currently. Co-pastoral administrators are a yet-untested model.

• **Constituency based ministry.** Current examples of this model are the Emmanuel Church of the Deaf, located in Rochester's 19th Ward; as well as campus, jail and hospital ministries.