

Strategic Planning Update for the Diocese of Evansville



January 2013

The following Q&A features the latest information about the strategic planning initiative currently underway in our diocese. This format was chosen to share with you some of the more common questions posed at our September deanery meetings.

What is the latest news regarding the Strategic Planning process in our diocese?

Deanery meetings that were held in September led to the creation of seven “core teams” — one representing each of our seven deaneries. Each core team includes the priests and pastoral life coordinators from all parishes within that deanery, as well as two non-staff parishioners from each church within the deanery.

These core teams began meeting monthly in October, led by facilitators and guided by diocesan recommendations and certain criteria that have been established as part of the strategic planning process. The mission of each team is to develop a “deanery plan” that will be presented to Bishop Charles C. Thompson in March 2013.

After consulting with the appropriate advisory groups, Bishop Thompson plans to make a final decision in May or June of 2013, with a public announcement of all strategic plan changes tentatively planned for July 2013.

Currently the core teams are still in the assessment and information gathering stage. As they move toward the spring, they will be solidifying their deanery plans and we will begin to get a much clearer picture of how strategic planning will reshape our diocese and strengthen our ability to serve the needs of 21st century parishioners.

Each Core group has met at least 4 times and they continue to hone their recommendations. Also, town hall meetings to gather input from a broader perspective begin Jan 31.

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What is the ultimate goal of this process?

The ultimate goal of the strategic planning process in the Diocese of Evansville is to revitalize, strengthen and bring new life to our parishes, churches and Catholic families in response to the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

Our society and way of life have changed immensely over the past 50 to 100 years. Our transportation and infrastructure have improved dramatically, large portions of our population have shifted from urban to suburban areas, technology has transformed the way we communicate and we have seen the number of priests in our diocese both rise and fall over time.

The purpose of strategic planning is to address these significant changes to our way of life, and to ask ourselves, as a diocesan family: How might we best utilize our resources to most effectively serve our people, now and in the future? How do we continue to grow in faith and love as a community while adapting to the demands — and wonderful opportunities — of the 21st century Church?

While undeniably there will be some loss and grieving associated with this strategic planning initiative, we firmly believe that new life awaits our Church at the end of this inevitable grieving process. The goal of strategic planning is to move our diocese, and its people, forward to this new, life-giving place. And hopefully, in so doing, also increase vocations within our diocese.

Why does this have to happen now?

This is a question that many Catholics around the country have asked over the years as their dioceses embarked on strategic planning initiatives similar to the one underway here. In the case of our diocese, the answer is that we simply have no choice but to embrace the challenges and opportunities of strategic planning at this time. A number of factors have led us to this conclusion, including:

An opportunity to better use our limited resources to develop a true 21st century approach to parish ministry — by more efficiently using our resources — both human and capital — we strongly believe that both our parishioners and priests will benefit.

A population shift — as in many communities, our diocese has experienced a population shift from the city to the suburbs.

Advancements in technology — modern transportation and improvements to roads make it far easier to travel from place to place than in the days when some of our churches and school buildings were constructed. In addition, computers, email and smart phones have dramatically changed the speed and ease with which we communicate.

Fewer priests — today, there are 46 active priests serving 69 parishes, and many of these men are nearing retirement age. Church guidelines call for priests to celebrate no more than three Masses a weekend (excluding weddings and funerals).

Declining Mass attendance — here in our diocese, survey data shows that fewer than 50 percent of Catholics regularly attend Mass at least once a week.

Decreasing enrollment in some Catholic schools — while vouchers have allowed more families to choose Catholic schools over the past two years, the fact remains that many of our schools have experienced a decline in enrollment over the past five years or more.

There are currently no plans to close or eliminate worship sites within the diocese. There will, however, be structural changes to some parishes.

What is going to happen to my church/parish as a result of this process?

First, there currently are no plans to close or eliminate worship sites. There will, however, be changes to the structure of some parishes. All of these proposed modifications are still being discussed and examined by the core teams, and all details are subject to change until the final plan is presented publicly in summer 2013.

What we can tell you today is that some parishes within the diocese with a single church site (and in some cases, a school) will become either merged or linked with other diocesan parishes.

A **merged parish** is created when two or more parishes (and the worship sites and schools associated with each parish) are merged to form a single, NEW parish. In this instance, all assets and liabilities of each parish being merged are united and become the responsibility of the new parish (including financial assets and liabilities). This new merged parish will have a single, new parish council, a new financial council, a new pastor, etc.

To use a fictional example: St. Ignatius Parish (which includes St. Ignatius Church and School) and St. Augustine Parish (which includes St. Augustine Church and School) are merged into a single new parish. A group from both parishes being merged comes together and decides to name their new, single parish, Mary, Mother of the Redeemer. As a result, Mary, Mother of the Redeemer Parish now includes St. Ignatius Church and School and St. Augustine Church and School. These structures remain even though the parishes once associated with them do not.

It is then up to the new pastor and other key persons associated with Mary, Mother of the Redeemer Parish to determine how to utilize the worship sites and schools within their new parish.

A **linked parish** is sometimes referred to as a cluster parish, and we currently have examples of this within our diocese. In a linked parish, a pastor is given the responsibility to serve more than one parish; typically he is assisted in his duties by an associate pastor, a pastoral associate, a deacon or some combination of the three. Each parish within the linked parish structure retains its own assets and liabilities, parish and financial councils, schools and worship sites, etc.

In our post-strategic planning structure, Mass schedules within linked parishes will be adjusted so that the pastor can adhere to Church guidelines regarding the number of Masses to be celebrated each weekend (no more than three per priest, excluding wedding and funeral Masses.) These guidelines have been established by the Church to ensure the health and well-being of all of our priests.

Again, no final decisions have been reached regarding which parishes will be merged or linked. The core teams continue to assess information and work through questions with the intention of presenting their recommendations to Bishop Thompson in March 2013.

A third possibility is transitioning a parish and the worship site within that parish into an **oratory** that would become affiliated with another parish. An oratory does not function as or give the appearance of a regular church (for instance, no regular Masses or Baptisms), but it can be used for Catholic weddings, funerals and other approved services.

The financial assets and liabilities of the oratory would become the property and responsibility of whatever parish becomes associated with the oratory.

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What is the difference between a parish and a church/worship site?

A Catholic church or worship site is a physical structure where believers gather to worship and give praise to God. In the case of a church (or cathedral), the Eucharist is present and Masses may be held.

A parish is not a physical place; rather, it is the smallest administrative district within the Catholic Church. A parish may include a single church, or it may include multiple worship sites, schools and other assets.

Within our diocese, parishes and churches (worship sites) have the same name. In the future, if several parishes merge together, the parish may choose a new name while the churches (worship sites) would not change their names.

If my parish becomes part of a new, merged or linked parish, does that mean I may end up with a different pastor?

Yes, that is a possibility. If, for instance, three churches with individual pastors are merged into a new parish, that parish will have a new, single pastor to be named by Bishop Thompson. This new pastor could be one of the three pastors from the churches being merged, or a different individual.

A newly linked parish may also end up with a new pastor, who would be appointed by Bishop Thompson.

What happens to schools within these new merged parishes? Could they merge with other schools?

First, it's important to note that **NO strategic planning-related changes to schools within the diocese will take effect during the 2013-14 school year.** The 2014-15 school year is the earliest that changes may be implemented. School changes may be announced in July 2013, but since the new school year begins in August, those announced changes would not go into effect until the following school year.

For the sake of illustration, let's say that a new merged parish created through the strategic planning process now includes three churches and two schools. All of these structures now become part of (and the responsibility of) the new, merged parish.

Could the leaders of this new, merged parish decide, at some point in the future, to consolidate these two schools? Yes, that is a possibility based on enrollment numbers, operational costs and other factors.

But again, no such changes would go into effect until the 2014-15 school year, at the earliest.

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Aren't we running the risk of losing parishioners and reducing Catholic school attendance with these changes?

Anytime you make structural and operational changes on the scale of what we are proposing, you run the risk of losing people. Another way to ask the question might be what do we risk by not making these changes? Given some of the challenges detailed earlier in this Q&A, we believe the risk and consequences of inaction exceed the risk and consequences of proceeding with our plan.

As for precisely how many Catholics we might lose in our diocese as a result of these changes, the results in other dioceses that have engaged in strategic planning vary considerably. Some have experienced a small reduction in overall numbers while others have seen their numbers increase while reporting that parishioners within newly merged and linked parishes feel a greater sense of community and are pleased to have gained access to new ministries and opportunities.

You mentioned that the declining number of priests in our diocese is a factor in these changes. What about utilizing foreign-born priests?

As touched upon earlier in this Q&A, we currently have 46 priests serving roughly the same number of churches that more than 100 priests once served. And due to the fact that several of our active priests are nearing retirement age, we expect our number of active priests to decline into the 30s within three years.

The idea of bolstering our numbers with foreign-born priests is something that has been discussed and considered, but the fact is most foreign-born priests typically work in the United States for a limited period of time — usually three to five years (or until their religious work visas expire). In addition, more stringent religious worker immigration regulations and increased demands for the service of foreign-born priests make it even more difficult to predict how long these men will be available within a given diocese.

However, Bishop Thompson and others are exploring the possibility of utilizing a foreign-born priest for specific situations (i.e. the Hispanic Ministry).

In other dioceses, parishioners within newly merged and linked parishes have reported feeling a greater sense of community once they had time to adapt to changes.

Why can't you give me more details of the plan for my deanery or parish?

As mentioned, core teams that include the priests and pastoral life coordinators from all parishes within the deaneries, as well as two non-staff parishioners from each church, have been meeting since October. Each core team will present a “deanery plan”

to Bishop Thompson in March 2013, and a public announcement of all strategic plan changes is intended for July 2013.

It's safe to say that throughout this strategic planning process (which began three years ago), our diocese has been as open and transparent, and has sought as much input from our people, as any diocese within the country that has undergone a strategic planning initiative.

As for why more specific details are not being shared today, the answer is that none of the proposed changes currently being discussed by the core teams is in any way final. Within each deanery, plans have continued to evolve and change throughout this process.

You might compare it to a business or organization within the private sector that is undergoing a significant restructuring of departments and functions. Typically, an organization would not publicly share the details of its strategic plan until all decisions have been finalized.

We do, however, plan to hold a Town Hall meeting where people from throughout the diocese will be able to express their thoughts.

During the town hall meetings, the Core group will present the alternatives they are considering. These meetings are being used to help them continue to refine their final recommendations.