

Strategic planning update

## Deanery meetings begin later this month, followed by ‘core groups’

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Message Editor

Over the past several weeks, Bishop Charles C. Thompson has touched upon the strategic planning process that is ongoing in the Diocese of Evansville in nearly every homily he has delivered. “This is a challenging time for us, but it can also be a time for opportunity,” he recently told parishioners at St. Rupert Church in Red Brush. “It presents an opportunity to ask ourselves, ‘How do we best serve our people and the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?’ How do we learn to use our gifts, talents and resources in new ways that meet the needs of the Church and its people?”

The answers to these questions are at the very heart of the strategic planning process, which enters a critical new phase in the weeks ahead. Beginning Monday, Sept. 17, a series of seven deanery meetings (one in each diocesan deanery) will take place over a 10-day period. Each meeting will be attended by priests, pastoral life coordinators, deacons and staff members from each parish in the deanery, along with principals of all schools within the deanery, strategic planning committee members and three non-staff members from each parish.

During these meetings, attendees will review the changes being proposed within their deanery and throughout the diocese. These changes include the merging and/or linking of some diocesan churches and schools, as well as a redefined role for some Church properties.

This proposed restructuring is a result of a number of key factors, including:

- **A shift in our population** - as in many other communities, the Diocese of Evansville 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 schools and churches can communicate with families.
- **A declining number of priests** - today, there are 46 active priests serving 69 parishes, and many of these men are nearing retirement age.
- **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.
- **An opportunity to better use our limited resources to develop a true 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to parish ministry** - by more efficiently using our resources – both human and capital – we strongly believe that both our priests and parishioners will benefit.

### Identifying ‘core groups’

A primary goal of these mid-September deanery meetings is the identification of a “core group” within each deanery. Each core group will include the priests and pastoral life coordinators from all parishes within the deanery, as well as two non-staff parishioners from each church in the deanery.

Utilizing diocesan recommendations along with certain criteria that have been established as part of the strategic planning process, the core groups will develop a Deanery Plan that will be

presented to Bishop Thompson in March 2013. Core Group meetings are scheduled to begin in October; an experienced facilitator will lead each session.

Members of the core groups will be asked to:

- Focus on being a representative of the deanery and the diocese, as opposed to focusing solely on their specific parish.
- Listen actively, think strategically and respect different opinions.
- Positively and effectively communicate outcomes of the Core Group to constituents.

### **Understanding the criteria**

Each core group must balance the desires and recommendations of their constituents with certain strategic planning absolutes, or criteria. The core group is expected to always consider:

- The number of priests within the diocese and the fact that this number is projected to decline significantly over the next several years. Each deanery will be allotted a maximum number of priests.
- The number of Masses per weekend that each priest will be expected to celebrate – no more than three.
- The fact that our diocese must not rely on our retired priests or foreign priests for assigned coverage.
- That Mass times within each deanery should overlap as little as possible.

### **‘A chance to renew ourselves’**

By March 2013, the final recommendations of the seven core groups will be presented to Bishop Thompson and his advisory groups for one last round of review. The final results of the strategic planning process should be announced in spring/summer 2013.

Undoubtedly, some of the changes that result from the strategic planning process will prove challenging. Bishop Thompson understands this very well because he has participated in two previous strategic planning efforts while serving the Archdiocese of Louisville.

“When I arrived in Evansville, the strategic planning process was already underway, and I was asked whether the process should continue,” said Bishop Thompson. “My response was, ‘We have no choice.’ We must be proactive, and we must determine – with guidance from the Holy Spirit - how best to serve our people through the various parish ministries and church institutions, while taking care of the well-being of our priests.”

Bishop Thompson said the key to turning an admittedly difficult situation into something positive for our diocese is how we choose, as a faith community, to view strategic planning.

“In this year of faith, it’s through the eyes of faith that this can be viewed as an opportunity - a chance to renew ourselves,” he said. “The challenge is to focus not on what is dying, but on what we are creating and how our Church and its leaders will be better able to serve the needs of its people in the years to come.”

*A Town Hall meeting in each of the seven deaneries is tentatively planned for this November. Please watch the **Message** for dates and additional details in the weeks ahead.*