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Catholic Pastoral Center

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Pastoral Planning Synopsis of a Dialogue with Bishop John LeVoir
And the Parishioners of the Shepherd of Souls Area Faith Community
(Our Lady, Manannah; St. Gertrude, Forest City; St. John, Darwin and St. Phillip, Litchfield)
Tuesday, May 31, 2016
Church of St. Phillip, Litchfield

DIALOGUE PARTICIPANTS: A group of over 250 parishioners joined Bishop LeVoir for his presentation from 6:30 to 8:30 pm. About 130 of the people were from St. Phillip's, 56 from St. John's, 33 from Our Lady and 31 from St. Gertrude's. Members of each parish were counted during introductions.

Fr. Joseph Steinbeisser, thanked people for coming and he emphasized his appreciation for the ministries everyone is helping to facilitate in the Shepherd of Souls AFC. It was recognized that the Shepherd of Souls Area Faith Community has already experienced an initial merger of the Good Shepherd and Seeker of Souls Area Faith communities following similar discussions four years ago.

Bishop led the opening prayer, the Prayer for the Implementation of the Fourth Plan for Parishes. He mentioned that the prayer serves to recognize our being configured to Christ and united as one in the New Evangelization, sharing the Good News of Christ by our example.

Bishop then began the discussion by pointing out key information from his pastoral letter: "Planning for Our Future." He emphasized the changes that have taken place since the diocese was formed in 1957. He pointed out that there now are an estimated 57,495 Catholics as compared to more than 68,000 in 1957. Similarly, 37 active priests serve 75 parishes as compared to 98 priests serving 86 parishes when the diocese was created. He also reflected that as few as 33% of baptized Catholics are in church on a given Sunday, recognizing that this participation ratio varies by parish and area faith community. Bishop LeVoir then reviewed a map of the diocese, our twenty-one area faith communities, and the priests who presently serve those parishes. Using this map, he pointed out significant pastoral planning efforts that are taking place throughout the diocese. He mentioned that four parishes would be closing or merging this summer as they would no longer be able to have a weekend Mass. Several other parishes are planning to merge or close in 2017. He reiterated that this is due to the declining numbers of priests and that we would have ten fewer (only 27) priests to serve our parishes in five years. He shared that many dioceses might simply conduct a study with consultants and a series of closures and consolidations would be recommended and implemented. On the other hand, the Diocese of New Ulm has been conducting pastoral planning at the parish and diocesan regional levels since the 1970's. The Fourth Plan is likely a last plan in the Diocese of New Ulm for years to come; as it is an on-going interactive process plan with alternatives coming from parishes and their pastors, not from the top down.

Bishop then reviewed the parish vitality index emphasizing that primarily, statistical, financial and sacramental numbers are used to create the rankings. Bishop recognized that every parish has vibrancy



and historically grounded roots, but the young people are not staying and the rural parishes specifically are experiencing significant population declines, especially as the older parish members die or move. Bishop also reviewed parish statistics from the four parishes in the Shepherd of Souls AFC. Generally, finances are solid and the parish populations are stable. He also shared a map of the churches in the region, their seating capacities and the number of people attending the weekend Masses celebrated in these churches. St. Gertrude's as an example has an average of only 61 weekend Mass participants on a given Sunday. Similarly, only 70 people on average attend the weekend Spanish Mass in Litchfield.

At this point, it was also recognized that Fr. Steinbeisser or Fr. Mandel each say four or five Masses on a weekend, while the canonical norm should be three and with four only as an exception. Their current schedules with weekend Masses and travel does not allow for any interaction with parishioners following an early Sunday Mass. If questions need to be answered or a weather event interferes, the priests are often late for the start of the next liturgy. It was also recognized that Fr. Joe and Fr. Brian typically have weekend funerals and weddings in addition to their commitment to each celebrate four or five weekend Masses.

Bishop then explained what a "merger" or a parish "closing" might involve. A smaller parish such as St. Gertrude's would be asked to merge with a larger parish in an AFC since there will not be priests to say weekend Masses in every small parish. Cemeteries have perpetual care maintenance funds and those would remain with the cemeteries. Assets belonging to the parishes would stay with the parishes to maintain and insure the structures and generally these assets would not be merged with those of the larger parish. At the same time, members of a merging parish would offer weekly collections in their new parish in order to support the work of the AFC as there are shared expenses with a pastor, in some cases an associate, and staff; such as a business manager, a DRE or other pastoral ministry resources. Again, the funds given to maintain the church in the case of a merged parish would be dedicated to these annual expenses. Bishop pointed out that the claims and lawsuits that exist would at this time prevent the actual mergers of any parish funds and assets. Closings or complete mergers will not take place until all parish lawsuits have been settled. At the same time, the discontinuation of weekend Masses in the smaller parishes will occur in the next several years. Weekday masses, weddings and funerals can still take place in a parish that has merged. Parishes will still be able to make decisions about the future of their church buildings as time goes forward. Other positive possibilities that Bishop LeVoir mentioned included: the continued sharing of resources and expertise in areas such as business management or the potential for full time AFC pastoral ministry resources. Bishop also encouraged that the current parishes need to do their best to work well together in support of each other and to support the priests and pastoral resources they are sharing as an AFC.

Bishop also shared the experiences of the parish closing in Taunton. The windows of the church were installed at St. Mary in Arlington and other sacred items were shared where needed in the diocese. The church was taken down. While it was a very sad occasion, the parish had declined in population and they were struggling to remain solvent. In this situation, closing the parish was the right thing to do.

Bishop LeVoir then invited questions and comments:

- How can we expect our priests to do anymore? A. Our priests do all they can and this is why I am asking all of us to do this planning, so that when the time comes we are prepared to merge parishes and adjust to fewer weekend Masses with fewer priests. Again, Fr. Steinbeisser and Fr. Mandle celebrate more weekend Masses than others and this must be considered as we look to the future. The time could come when there would only be a single pastor to serve this AFC.
- Why do we need a Spanish Mass, if so few attend and many are also English speakers? A. The Diocese of New Ulm has a commitment to Hispanic ministry and specifically to a weekend Spanish Mass with so many Latino people in the Litchfield area. Fr. Steinbeisser added that people have a strong faith experience and personal identity when a Mass is celebrated in their spoken language. Tom Keaveny also pointed out that St. Phillip's had considered a bilingual weekend Mass in past planning dialogues. At that time, the Anglo parishioners as well as the Latino parishioners preferred a Spanish Mass. As there will be fewer weekend Masses in the future, throughout the diocese,

opportunities for Spanish elements in any liturgy or scheduled bilingual liturgies are options that should be revisited.

- I'm wondering where the people go if merged? A. People would be encouraged to join the larger parishes in the AFC, but they could join another parish closer to where they live.
- Are there future priests now in the seminary? A. We have 9 right now. One will be ordained this summer. The other 8 are in full time studies and committed to becoming priests in the future. Seminarian Nathan Hansen is with us here tonight.
- If a smaller parish is closed or merged, what will happen with the maintenance if much is done by volunteers? A. We would hope those volunteers would continue their service. However, if they do not, someone will need to be hired.
- Are the law suits with the diocese or the parishes a factor in this planning? A. Not in regards to our need to prepare for no Sunday Masses in our smaller parishes. We will not merge or close any parishes where there are lawsuits or claims pending. We are doing our best to plan for any legal and financial outcome. Parish life will continue and the diocese will provide the pastoral support it always has, regardless of the legal outcomes. The angle to sue parishes had to do with going after insurance monies. Parishes are not and were not responsible for the behaviors of priests or their assignments.
- Would Area Faith Community assessments to our parishes continue if we no longer have Masses? A. Yes, with regards to maintenance and fixed costs. Other allocations would depend on whether people join a new parish and the staffing needs of the AFC. Merged and closed parishes will no longer be assessed a contribution to the diocesan annual DUF.
- Would our parish fund raisers still continue? A. Yes, and that would be up to the parishioners.
- What about our deacons? A. Deacons are generally assigned to their home parish. Some are working in expanded roles in the AFC they are located. The deacons can help with some of the sacramental activities but they cannot celebrate the Mass.
- Can there be Masses on every other weekend in our small parishes? A. This is not a preferred option for vibrant parish life. This would be up to the pastor and the parishes involved. Alternate weekend Masses have been done in other AFC's in the diocese. The pastor and the parishioners need to address this as an emergency alternative. Similarly, we would not plan for Sunday communion services instead of Mass except in extreme weather or health emergencies.
- What has happened to address and support the needs of the small parishes in the AFC. "It seems like everything is centered on the larger parish and the smaller parishes are losing ground. What happened to the notion that the last shall be first?" A. Certainly, pastoral planning needs to support the people in all of our parishes. Our AFC model has served to help keep small parishes open as much as possible. It is up to everyone in the AFC to support and participate in parish events in each parish in an AFC. This is a priority for everyone.

Bishop LeVoir then thanked the parishioners for coming and he encouraged more conversation and continued collaboration. Fr. Steinbeisser then thanked Bishop LeVoir for the time he had taken to lead this dialogue. He encouraged people to think about the right solutions going forward as meetings with parish administrative councils will begin in the fall.

Bishop LeVoir then led the closing prayer, with everyone reciting the "Hail Mary".

Respectfully Submitted,



Tom Keaveny
Director of Pastoral Planning