

“The Times, They Are A-Changing:” Responding to Changing Realities: Entering into Clustering

Note: This is the fourth of a series on “the big picture” of the changing realities and emerging trends facing the Diocese of Cleveland and what is required of us to deal with the challenges we face.

“In every age, the church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and in interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task.” (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, #4)

The “signs of the times” are evident in the Diocese of Cleveland: a flat/shrinking population base with continued out-migration from the cities/inner-ring suburbs to outlying areas; fewer priests and an aging priest population; parishes struggling with challenges of growth/decline, fewer Catholics attending Sunday Mass and many parishes struggling with financial challenges.

Clearly, the “signs of the times” require us to act, if we are to carry out our mission as Church.

The way our diocese is doing this is by clustering parishes and calling the parishes in the cluster to come together and collaborate to create a future together. Each parish will be represented by the pastor, a member of the pastoral staff, a representative from Parish Council, a representative of Finance Council, and a person chosen “at-large.” During the next year, these representatives of each parish will meet together as the Cluster Planning and Coordination Team to create a plan for the future of pastoral care and ministry for these communities.

One might ask, “How is this different from the kind of strategic planning process that any business might do when faced with downsizing or a need to restructure?”

“Keep your Church alert in faith to the signs of the times and eager to accept the challenge of the Gospel.” (*Eucharistic Prayer for Various Needs and Occasions*, III)

What makes what we are being called to do different from the kind of strategic planning process that a business or a non-profit agency does is that we are being called to be “alert *in faith*” to the challenges and opportunities we face. Although we will be entering into a planning process and will be called to use all the wisdom and best practices of the planning process, for us as Catholics this is *primarily* a journey of faith. The key question that we are called to pray and reflect on is:

At this time, what is God asking of us as a church?

The great feast of Pentecost celebrates the gift of the Spirit, given freely and abundantly “to guide you to all truth.” (John 16: 13) We are called to believe and to trust that the Spirit will continue to guide us as a church, if we are open, willing to listen, and to follow as the Spirit leads.

This, in turn, requires us to root this process ever more deeply in prayer and discernment. While it is vital for the leaders and representatives from each parish to pray as they go through the planning process in their cluster, it is just as important for every member of every parish to pray for the cluster planning teams and for our whole diocese during this time.

The greatest enemy of openness is fear – fear of loss, fear of things being different, fear of what is unfamiliar and new, fear of the hard work and cost that change entails. We need to take to heart the words of Jesus: “Fear is useless; what is needed is trust!” (Luke 8:50) We are called to trust – that God is faithful; that the Lord is with us, according to his promise (cf. Matthew 28: 20); that it is God who is doing “something new” (Isaiah 43:19) and that the Lord is calling us to fuller, more abundant life (cf. John 10:10).

The greatest enemy of growing together is selfishness and self-centeredness, focusing on ourselves – on what we want, how we like things, what’s best for us. We need to open ourselves to Gospel wisdom: “Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16: 25); “For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them” (Romans 12:4-6); “Your heavenly Father knows that you need these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides.” (Matthew 6:32-33); “This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. There is no greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:12-13)

What we are being called to do requires a vision of the common good of the larger community, rather than the particular good of one community; a sacrificial love that can “die to self” for the benefit of that greater, common good; the humility to be open to hear another’s (perhaps greater) wisdom and receive another’s gifts; the patience and perseverance to journey together and find a better way.

If we can be open and trusting, humble, selfless and loving, we will be able to recognize the gifts, to see the possibilities, to embrace the at-times painful and difficult work of change in order to meet the challenges we face and, indeed, create something better – more faith-filled, more loving, more effective in serving the needs of God’s people and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

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