



Diocese Clarifies Plain Dealer story on "Reluctance to Close Churches"

A recent front page story in the Cleveland Plain Dealer newspaper asserted that the Diocese of Cleveland's reluctant to close parishes is putting a strain on priests. Here is the Diocese's verbatim response to the Plain Dealer's questions for the article. We direct you to question # 4 in particular, and the discussion of current parish staffing.

1. Since none of the Vibrant Parish Life ministry teams decided to look into areas of church closings or consolidation, what is the diocesan plan for examining this issue?

(Response #1)

Looking at the vibrancy and future of parish communities is an ongoing process in the Diocese. Parishes have been provided over the years with a number of resources which have helped them to look at their futures. Most recent of those has been the *Vibrant Parish Life* initiative.

This process provides four convictions which are essential in the process of discernment for the future: 1). An ongoing process that we use for sharing our resources and personnel must be an experience of "communion" growing together in Christ. 2). Any solutions we develop must come from and be embraced willingly with the heart by the local communities involved. 3). The initiative and cooperation of the men and women currently in leadership in every parish are essential. 4). The result of our discernment will be a collaborative effort, involving the networking of several ministries and communities in each area of the Diocese, permeating yet respecting the boundaries of existing parishes.

Any process which would lead to the closing of a parish would be initiated at the parish level and involve the parish pastoral and finance councils, the various parish commissions, and the members of the parish staff in consultation with the people of the parish in reviewing the vibrancy of the parish's life. Members of the Diocesan staff work with the parishes as a resource and support.

2. Are there churches under consideration for merger or closing now?

(Response #2)

No.

3. What process will be used for making decisions on church closings and what will be opportunities for input from parishioners?

(Response #3)

When leadership of a parish comes to a point where it needs to assess the future; the Bishop looks to the parish council, the parish finance council, the parish commissions and staff to gather information from the parish community before considering any course of action. The parish organizations facilitate an assessment of all aspects of parish life and ministry in collaboration with diocesan staff. That

assessment is then submitted to the Bishop. A decision is never made without a written recommendation from the parish community.

4. From the Diocesan perspective, what are the major considerations in making decision on parish and priest deployment?

(Response #4)

The Diocese views the staffing of our parish communities in a broad fashion. Certainly, in the consideration of staffing, the assignment of a priest to parish staffs is significant. However, we also consider the talents of all who have been formed for ministry in the Church: lay ecclesial ministers, deacons, religious men and women and other lay persons whose expertise is vital to the life and ministry of a parish community.

Beyond the staff, we rely on the involvement of the people of the parish in areas such as finance (parish finance councils), the activities and direction of the parish (parish pastoral council and organizations), development of the parish plant (building and grounds committees) and a variety of other ways as the need and desire arise.

The theology of Baptism in the Catholic tradition is rooted in the belief that through Baptism all are called to ministry and participation in the life of the Church. It is this belief that is at the heart of Bishop Pilla's pastoral letter, *The Church in the City*. In that document he "called on all Catholics in every part of our Cleveland Diocese to join me in this commitment to our cities and the churches in our cities." It was this call that brought people together from all parts of the eight county diocese in partnership relationships and helped us to realize that when all come to the table with gifts, we can do so much more than we can separately.

It is this same spirit that is at the heart of the Vibrant Parish Life initiative and cluster planning. These relationships and sincere collaborations between people of neighboring and far distant parishes will certainly have a positive impact on the future of the parishes in the diocese.

5. Comments on the national diocesan statistics which were presented to Rick Krivanka of the Pastoral Planning Staff.

(Response #5)

The situation of each diocese is far more complex than can be ascertained from these statistics, which makes comparisons difficult when considering potential closings and consolidations, or various other issues. Far more analysis is needed of complex factors to do fair comparisons. For example, during the 1980's, some diocese did urban planning that resulted in extensive parish closings. In one case this was because a new bishop inherited a situation of widespread diocesan funding of inner city parishes that had diminished in membership and could not support themselves. Those dioceses were operating in deficits and faced potential bankruptcies without changes. Other dioceses such as **Cleveland** did urban planning in this same period and did not have such closings, nor did we have a socio-economic situation that was forcing such decision.

The issues of priest/people populations varies differently in different dioceses, especially when priests from religious orders plus diocesan priests are compared with the number of diocesan priests only. These ratios are complicated by unanticipated changes in deployment by religious orders and by how this deployment takes place, e.g. parish work, universities/schools and other ministries. Cleveland is in a relatively moderate range in comparison to the dioceses listed. Our decline in priests is about the average.

While we have lower ratio of priests/parishes than some dioceses, we also have significantly fewer Catholics/parishes than other dioceses, so we are not sure what significant comparisons that data yields.