

FREQUENTLY-ASKED-QUESTIONS (FAQs)

Volume 2 – July 18, 2006

The 2006 Lenten meetings introduced parishes to the *Vibrant Parish Life – Phase II* process and Resource Manual. An initial set of FAQ's was included in this Manual. Following these Lenten meetings, District Chairpersons were asked to gather information on emerging questions and concerns that need to be addressed and clarified. This document is a response to some of the key questions and concerns regarding *Vibrant Parish Life – Phase II* that were raised at the May 2006 District meetings and the Diocesan Pastoral Council's Gathering of Parish Pastoral Council leaders in April. Questions from eight District meetings were submitted.

QUESTION 1: What is Bishop's Lennon position regarding *Vibrant Parish Life – Phase II*?

ANSWER:

Bishop Lennon has met with the *Vibrant Parish Life – Phase II* Diocesan Committee and expressed his recognition of the great amount of work that has been done. He noted how our initiative is in the mainstream of what dioceses are doing. He expressed his support for the importance of the education process, for participation by all parishes in what we undertake as a diocese, and for the October 1 timeline for submitting parish proposals for cluster partner configurations. He is aware of the concern and need for him to make a public statement about this process, and intends to do so after he has had more time to listen and study what is happening.

QUESTION 2: What –in a nutshell-- is clustering all about? Sharing staffing? Sharing resources? Sharing ministries? Providing the sacraments? Reconfiguring parishes?

ANSWER:

All of the above. A cluster is a group of parishes committed to a long term relationship of collaboration to plan and provide pastoral care for these communities. Clusters increase the capacity of the Church and the parishes in given areas to address a wide range of pastoral needs and changing realities. Each cluster will need to address its unique situation. "One size does not fit all." A plan for pastoral care may include coordinating Mass schedules, sacramental ministries and non-Eucharistic worship. It may include developing staffing configurations to serve the clustered parishes that involve sharing priests, deacons, lay ecclesial ministers, parish life coordinators, business managers, lay leaders, etc. Sharing ministries, administration and facilities are further possibilities. In some cases, planning for needed mergers and consolidations will be addressed.

QUESTION 3: In discerning cluster partners, how strictly are the subjective and objective criteria to be followed? Are some factors, like geography, more important than others?

ANSWER:

The subjective and objective criteria are meant as guidelines more than rules. The fact that there are so many criteria to consider is a recognition that "one size does not fit all" when it come to clustering. Different areas of the diocese experience different pastoral realities, making some criteria more important than others. Geography is, however, a very important consideration. If a parish is going to coordinate its Mass schedule, or share staff, ministries, or a school with cluster partners, parish staff and parishioners will need to travel and participate in activities beyond their parish boundaries.

QUESTION 4: What happens if no parish wants to cluster with a particular parish?

ANSWER:

In response to the parish proposals for cluster partner configurations, the *Vibrant Parish Life – Phase II* Committee, which includes diocesan and parish staff, will prepare the Diocesan-wide First Draft of proposed clusters for all parishes. It will ensure that all parishes will be placed in a cluster even if no parish included them in a cluster proposal (and even if they did not submit a proposal). In placing such a parish in a cluster, the diocesan review and related draft will weigh issues of pastoral and fiscal soundness, and the common good of the Church.

QUESTION 5: Can you clarify the long-term goal of clustering? It would be helpful to better understand the future needs which the diocese is trying to address through clustering.

ANSWER:

The diocese is trying to respond to present realities that will become more acute in the future: changes in Catholic population, financial resources and pastoral needs, and an imbalanced distribution of priest personnel and fewer priests to assign. Clusters can work out pastoral care plans to manage present ministry demands and create “contingency plans” on how to meet these demands in a time of further changes and fewer priests. Clusters can develop more efficient and effective staffing configurations to serve the collective needs of the clustered parishes. Staff positions can be created that are otherwise not possible. Clusters of parishes can share ministries and administration and make wise use of existing parish facilities and buildings. Clusters of parishes can work together to sustain the presence of a Catholic school in a given area. They can also address the need to reconfigure parish structures (i.e., close, merge, or build new parishes and facilities) if the need arises. For these reasons, we believe that cluster-based planning is the most effective way of addressing our present and future realities.

QUESTION 6: How do we address fears of closing and merging?

ANSWER:

With fewer parishioners, financial resources and priests available, closing and merging will be a reality some parishes have to face. By forming clusters of parishes, a planning group will be in place to give people a voice in exploring the best options if merging or consolidating becomes necessary. In many cases, mergers and consolidations create a healthier, more vibrant ministerial presence in a given area, and can serve more parishioners than each individual parish did on its own. In merging and consolidating, people need to prayerfully work through their fears and resistance to change, realizing that God is always with us. There is loss and a time to grieve, and there is also gain and hope for a brighter, more vibrant future.

QUESTION 7: How can nationality parishes maintain their ethnic identity through the clustering process?

ANSWER:

In forming a cluster of parishes, each parish has its own parish identity, canonical status and financial accountability. Clustering, in and of itself, is not a threat to ethnic identity. In fact, clustering may make those in ethnic parishes more aware of what is unique about their parish, just like traveling in a foreign country makes one more aware of American culture. Ethnic parishes are located in the same neighborhoods as territorial parishes and have the capacity to cooperate in different areas of pastoral care and outreach while preserving ethnic identity and traditions.

We recognize that those in ethnic parishes often have unique cultural and linguistic needs and it is important for the Church serve these needs. Collaboration between parishes serving the same ethnic groups – whether they are in the same cluster of parishes or not – is one way of meeting these needs.

Cultural and linguistic needs of new immigrants need to be served even when no pre-existing nationality parish exists. In these situations, territorial parishes offer Mass in languages other than English and incorporate many of the symbols, festivals and piety practices of these new immigrants into their mission and ministry. This is one way of supporting a group's faith and cultural identity outside of a designated ethnic parish model.

QUESTION 8: How do we effectively educate our parishioners?

ANSWER:

Use the educational and catechetical materials in the *Vibrant Parish Life – Phase II Resource Manual*. Parishes are using the educational documents as bulletin inserts, or reprinting parts of them in the bulletin itself. Parish leaders are discussing these same documents in meetings. Pastors are reflecting insights from the materials in their homilies and pastor's columns in the bulletin. The *Vibrant Parish Life – Phase II* posters are being displayed in churches. Parishes report using the PowerPoint presentations provided for education and catechesis with parishioners. We have also heard of some creative uses of the materials in the manual that parishes have developed on their own. We encourage parishes to share ideas with each other to help make the best possible use of these resources. In some cases, neighboring parishes in a given area are coordinating their educational efforts.

QUESTION 9: Is there a procedure to be followed to begin a dialogue with other parishes about clustering?

ANSWER:

No. Parishes are free to take whatever initiative makes sense in contacting each other to discuss clustering before proposing potential partners. While this is not a requirement, many parishes have chosen to do so, and are using a range of informal steps. Pastors are contacting other pastors. Parish Pastoral Councils are contacting other councils. Parish Ad-Hoc Subcommittees to Discern Proposals for Cluster Partners are contacting their counterparts at other parishes. Parish staffs and subcommittees are getting together to envision possibilities and discover areas of common ground for the type of collaboration and mutual support that might be developed through clustering.

QUESTION 10: Who really decides in the end which parishes will cluster together? Will there be an appeal process?

ANSWER:

Through their “Proposal of Cluster Partners Form,” parishes make recommendations as the first step in the decision-making process by offering configurations and rationales that make sense. In reviewing proposed clusters, the *Vibrant Parish Life – Phase II* Committee which includes diocesan and parish staff will try to accommodate a parish’s first preference. However, overlapping preferences, the need to include all parishes in clusters, and the need to maintain a viable Catholic presence in all areas of the diocese may make honoring all first preferences difficult. That’s why the “Proposal of Cluster Partners Form” asks for second and third preferences.

After reviewing all submittals, the *Vibrant Parish Life – Phase II* Committee will send a Diocesan-wide First Draft of proposed clusters to all parishes on December 1, 2006 for review and feedback. Parishes will have two months (from December 1 to February 1) to respond to this First Draft proposal, using steps to be provided at that time. If a parish disagrees with its First Draft cluster arrangement, it can – in effect – appeal using this process. A Second Draft and consultation will be done where needed. By April 30, 2007 clusters will be finalized following approval by parishes and final approval by Bishop Lennon.

QUESTION 11: When will we have answers to some of the particulars of cluster planning and implementation?

ANSWER:

In preparation for the training of cluster planning teams in May/June of 2007, many more resources are being obtained from other dioceses. Materials will then be developed for our diocese and will address details related to the membership of a cluster planning team, leadership, facilitation, planning steps, and the sharing and funding of staff persons and ministries. Proposals and plans developed by cluster planning teams will require approval by the pastor, parish pastoral council and finance council of the participating parishes. Initial cluster plans will be submitted to a diocesan review committee by June, 2008 for review and subsequent approval by Bishop Lennon, and creation of an overall diocesan plan.