

In January of 2012 Bishop Paul Sirba presented the Diocesan Strategic Plan (2012-2017), which was to take into the account the possible lower number of clergy, shifting demographic trends across the diocese, the fiscal health and infrastructure of the parishes, as well as the health and well-being of clergy. The planning process brought together more than 250 people from across Northeastern Minnesota.

One of the important challenges that was addressed by the plan was how to deal with an anticipated decline in the number of clergy available. In 1996 there were 69 priests working in parishes in the diocese. As the planning process began in 2010, there were 45 Pastors assigned in parishes. The strategic plan projected that there would be a substantial decline in the number of pastors available from 2012-14. This low number (36-37) was based on the number of priests who could retire after the age of 70. Scenarios suggested that the number of pastors available would rise back to 2010 levels by 2017 due to the ordination of the large group of seminarians that were studying at the time. Currently, there are 43 pastors assigned to parishes in the diocese. There are an additional 6 young priests (associates or parochial vicars) who will be qualified to be assigned as pastors in the next 1-2 years. There are no ordinations of priests scheduled for 2015, and there are potentially 2 seminarians who could be ordained priests in 2016. At the same time, there are several priests who will have reached retirement age and could retire. It is also important to remember that the diocese must plan for fewer priests due to unforeseen illness, death or for other reasons.

Shifting demographic trends have had a major impact on the clustering and merging of parishes. In the implementation of the strategic plan to date, the greatest change in a small geographic area has been in the merger and clustering of the small parishes along Highway 169 in the Hibbing Deanery. Parishes in Pengilly, Keewatin, Taconite and Marble once served thriving mining communities. As the mining economy changed, people moved out of these towns leaving very small congregations struggling to keep paying the expense of having church buildings and clergy. Even the larger parishes of St. Cecilia/Nashwauk and Mary Immaculate/Coleraine are clustered now and share clergy.

The combination of shifting populations and the regional economy will also affect other parishes across the diocese through the remaining years of the strategic plan and beyond. Many small parishes are still finding it difficult to afford the cost of a pastor and/or the upkeep of their church buildings.

Implementation of the Strategic Plan has been slow and deliberate, working with people in the affected parishes. The plan did not prioritize when or how particular parts of the plan were to be implemented, but left that to the discretion of the Bishop.

There were several options for the clustering and merging of parishes outlined in the Strategic Plan:

Clustered Parishes work together, sharing clergy (and possibly staff) but maintaining separate Finance and Pastoral Councils. In clustered parishes, each parish maintains its church building for worship and is a separate legal entity.

Merged Parishes share clergy and staff and have one or more church buildings but have become one parish (civilly and canonically). The phrase: “**Merged with**” is used when two or more parishes become one parish but retain multiple church buildings. The phrase “**Merged into**” is used when two or more parishes become one parish with one church building for worship.

The following is a review of where we are in early 2015, about halfway through the period of time covered by the Strategic Plan.

Brainerd Deanery

There has been a re-alignment of the clusters: St. Francis/Brainerd, All Saints/Baxter and St. Thomas/Pine Beach now form one cluster while St. Andrew/Brainerd and St. Mathias/Ft. Ripley are another separate cluster.

St. Christopher/Nisswa, St. Alice/Pequot Lakes and Our Lady of Lourdes/Pine River have begun the process of *merging with* each other.

Cloquet Deanery

St. Joseph/Finlayson has *merged into* St. Luke/Sandstone and closed. Sacred Heart/Bruno has also *merged into* St. Luke/Sandstone and closed.

St. Joseph/Beroun is now *clustered with* Immaculate Conception/Pine City.

Duluth Deanery

The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Rosary/Duluth is *clustered with* St. Mary Star of the Sea/Duluth and Our Lady of Mercy/Duluth.

St. James/Duluth is *clustered with* St. Elizabeth/Duluth and St. Margaret Mary/Duluth.

Hibbing Deanery

St. Ann/Bena *merged into* St. Joseph/Ball Club and closed.

St. John/Hill City *merged into* St. Joseph/Grand Rapids and closed. St. Paul/Warba *merged into* St. Joseph/Grand Rapids and closed. St. Joseph/Grand Rapids is *clustered with* St. Augustine/Cohasset.

St. Kevin/Pengilly *merged into* St. Cecilia/Nashwauk and closed. St. Mary/Keewatin *merged into* St. Cecilia/Nashwauk and closed.

St. Mary/Marble *merged into* Mary Immaculate/Coleraine and closed. St. Joseph/Taconite *merged into* Mary Immaculate/Coleraine and closed.

St. Cecilia/Nashwauk is *clustered with* Mary Immaculate/Coleraine.

Virginia Deanery

Queen of Peace/Hoyt Lakes and St. John Biwabik have begun the process of *merging with* Holy Rosary/Aurora.

St. Mary/Cook is *clustered with* Holy Cross/Orr and St. Martin/Tower.

Sacred Heart/Virginia and Sacred Heart/Mt. Iron *merged with* Holy Spirit/Virginia.

Clergy health was an important consideration in the creation of the strategic plan and has been important in its implementation. Efforts have been made by the Bishop to control the number of Masses priests are required to say on a weekend. Clusters of parishes have been created within reasonable driving distances of each other. In places where there is a high level of sacramental activity and schools, the planners requested, and in most cases the Bishop has been able to, assign Parochial Vicars to those parishes. These young priests help the pastors of these busy parishes while they learn pastoral and administrative skills that will help them in the future.

In September of 2012 Bishop Sirba wrote, “The Lord said to his first disciples, *I am the vine, you are the branches...If you remain in me you will bear much fruit (John 15:5)...*If we work together, care for each other, and unite our hearts in prayer I am confident that the Lord will bless our efforts to organize ourselves in new ways that will allow us more effectively to witness to Jesus Christ as the way and the truth and the life of the world.” Our efforts to accomplish these tasks continue.