

THE BUFFALO NEWS

Diocese has followed a truly collaborative process

Michael W. Fisher | October 19, 2025

I sincerely appreciate the close attention of The Buffalo News to our efforts to conclude the difficult and protracted Chapter 11 reorganization process that has been the focus of so much reporting over these past five years.

However, it seems the Editorial Board is less familiar with the collaborative process that has consistently guided our efforts to define a new era of Catholic faith and impact across Western New York.

It may be helpful to detail the timeline and process of collaboration that has been our norm from the earliest stage. The Road to Renewal – our initiative to unite parishes that have been struggling due to declining attendance, diminishing resources, and rising costs with those stronger and more vibrant – began five years ago under Bishop Edward Scharfenberger during his term as Apostolic Administrator.

Importantly, this effort began months before the Diocese entered Chapter 11 bankruptcy in February 2021. The Renewal developed six strategic pillars for the purpose of addressing the issues that were affecting our parishes – Liturgy, Spiritual Life, Outreach and Inreach, Stewardship, Forming Disciples, and Administration.

These pillars require that lay leadership and collaboration are at the forefront of the entire renewal process, bringing the best of our parish communities together with our clergy to develop goals and clear plans to move our parishes and families forward.

This long-overdue assessment of how best to use diocesan resources to meet the spiritual, educational, pastoral and social needs of the faithful and others who depend on our ministries mirrors similar renewal efforts underway in dioceses nationwide. In 2020, we held 18 listening sessions with parishioners from every corner of the Diocese – including youth and young adults, lay ministers, principals, religious educators, cultural commissions, the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and the Bishop’s Council of the Laity.

More than 5,000 participants shared their insights on the future of parish life. That same year, a Catholic Leadership Institute survey gathered over 10,000 responses, providing data that guided the preliminary grouping of parishes into “families.” After my appointment in January 2021, I paused the process to allow for deeper collaboration. I visited each vicariate twice to meet directly with clergy and lay leaders, gathering recommendations and listening to concerns.

Between August and October, we finalized the initial parish families, though invited further input and even allowed impacted parishes to request a change if they felt they were better suited to be combined with a parish other than the one designated. Every change request was granted.

In April 2022, we began the process of clergy reassignments within parish families but paused again to obtain further feedback from priests and deacons. After extensive dialogue, reassignments were completed that

June. To ensure transparency and shared understanding, we initiated bi-monthly Renewal meetings for clergy and laity, now held several times a year to coordinate priorities and define next steps.

Late in 2023 and throughout 2024, we began merging and, in some cases, closing parishes – again guided by data from the Catholic Leadership Institute. Each proposed merger or closure was reviewed by the affected parish families, which could submit counterproposals.

In May 2024, a diocesan team of lay leaders evaluated all counterproposals and presented final recommendations for my consideration. The Diocesan Presbyteral Council then reviewed each recommendation before voting and submitting their conclusions to me for final determination.

In May of this year, we established the Renewal Advisory Group – a body of lay and clergy leaders – to guide implementation of the Road to Renewal and assist parish families as they transition. Most recently, on Sept. 30 and Oct. 1, all parish families came together with clergy and lay leaders to define strategic goals in relation to each of our strategic pillars for the coming year.

These meetings recognize that every family is at a different stage of implementation and still provide the opportunity to set strategic goals, regardless of where individual parishes are in the Renewal process. The Renewal Team and Advisory Group are now finalizing those goals for 2026. Just last week, parish families gathered to share successes, challenges, and proposed refinements reflecting their local realities and specific priorities.

I harbor no illusions about the difficulty of this process or the pain that change can involve. Nor am I indifferent to the deep hurt and disappointment some feel over the heavy cost of settling the many claims of

those who have suffered the grievous physical, emotional and spiritual harm of criminal sexual abuse.

Yet only as a true family of faith – honest about our past failures and steadfast in our support for one another – can we finally close the difficult chapter of these past years and together write a new, more hopeful one that reveals the transformative power of our Christian and Catholic faith.

The Most Rev. Michael W. Fisher is bishop of the Diocese of Buffalo.