



Frequently Asked Questions About Clusters of Parishes (Part 2)

“We each must do our part to plant the seeds and lay the foundation for collaboration and unity that will deepen with time...I am confident that the Spirit is moving among us and will renew our local Church”. Bishop Anthony Pilla, Vibrant Parish Life Pastoral Letter

In the fall of 2005, a series of consultations were conducted with priests, pastoral staffs and Parish Pastoral Council leaders regarding proposals for *Vibrant Parish Life – Phase II*. The following is the second part of a response to questions and concerns raised in these consultations. These responses are based on the shared wisdom of dioceses in other parts of the country and adapted for our diocese.

1. *I understand why some parishes will need to cluster to maintain and enhance their vitality, but do ALL parishes have to cluster? What benefit could clustering be to a large suburban parish with lots of programs?*

Some of our large suburban parishes are quite vibrant when it comes to certain programs and ministries. However, the sacramental needs of large parishes can be overwhelming for one priest. The number and timing of Marriages, Baptisms, Funerals and Masses may require the assistance of deacons and other priests. Developing contingency plans on how to handle sacramental needs when fewer priests are available is a main function of the clustering process. Five years from now (and already in some situations) many large parishes with one priest will not be able to meet their sacramental workload without cooperation with other parishes. We need to form relationships and plans for providing sacramental ministries that will support parishes, priests, deacons and ministers for years to come.

In addition, parishes can share a particular ministry that is a strength in one community, and an unmet need in another. In a number of cases a more effective ministry which better serves more people is made possible (e.g. youth ministry, RCIA, bereavement, parish school...) Sharing ministry can avoid duplicating programs, make more effective use of staff time, and offer an opportunity for a new staff position not otherwise possible without collaboration.

In many cases, parishes in a cluster can create new opportunities and synergy that is not realized at this time.

2. *How does clustering affect existing collaborative relationships outside the designated cluster?*

Parishes in the cluster can best address certain pastoral needs, especially related to staffing. However, other forms of collaboration will also be needed as the most effective way to provide certain ministries (e.g. on the district level, with other individual parishes, in Church in the City partnerships separate from the cluster, and between parish clusters). As Church we are called to deepen our bonds of relationship and mutual support.

In considering the potential of cluster-cluster relationships, past experiences with Church in the City partnerships have revealed that even in the best partnerships, an urban or suburban parish still needs to address certain pastoral needs and the long term presence of the Church with neighboring parishes. In these cases, there may be new possibilities for enhancing ministerial capacity by forming a cluster-cluster Church in the City partnership.

3. *Is clustering intended as a first step to closing parishes? If there is a shortage of priests, why are we clustering rather than closing parishes?*

Given the experience of other dioceses, many clusters continue for years with each parish sustaining its own identity. In other cases, mergers, consolidation or closing are chosen as the only way to sustain a lasting Church presence with a critical number of people, ministries and finances. Forming clusters of parishes embraces the principle of subsidiarity and respects the role of diocesan leadership. This approach empowers people at the local level to have a voice in collaborating to develop effective, creative and long term responses to pastoral needs.

4. *How have other dioceses incorporated parishes served by religious orders, as well as nationality/ethnic parishes into their clustering plans?*

Based on the experience of other dioceses, nationality/ethnic parishes, and parishes served by religious orders participate like other parishes within a cluster. In our own diocese, there are many examples of these parishes fully participating in giving support and leadership to collaboration among parishes.

5. *How does clustering affect parish finances?*

Each parish is responsible for the administration of its own finances. Any agreements to financially support a ministry, staff person or other activity within a cluster are negotiated by the respective parishes in a way that makes sense to parish leaders. Guidelines for these negotiations will be provided as a part of the training for cluster planning teams in May/June of 2007.

6. *How does the parish clustering process relate to school clustering and school finances?*

With regard to Catholic schools, one key consideration in discerning cluster partners can be the “capacity to do cluster work” that involves sustaining a Catholic school in a given area. A variety of models for sharing school costs among parishes are available from the Office of Catholic Education.

7. *How are the details of working as a cluster of parishes to be addressed?*

In preparation for the training of cluster planning teams in May/June of 2007, many more resources and details will be provided to address matters such as 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 the Bishop, and creation of an overall diocesan plan.

Going Deeper:

Reflect on the learning that has surfaced as you read this. Identify any new insights and understanding.

1. How has the information provided addressed particular questions or concerns you may have had regarding forming clusters of parishes?