

17. *What does multiple parish pastoring mean for the availability of the sacraments that only priests can provide—the Mass, confessions, the Sacrament of the Sick, etc?*

The real issue here is not Multiple Parish Pastoring as much as the priest shortage. As the availability of priests decreases, the availability of these sacraments decreases. One of the strategies for future staffing of our parishes is a renewed effort to encourage vocations to the priesthood.

PARISH LIFE

18. *In our town, there are two very different “feeling” parishes. How do we merge the culture of the different parishes? Would we want to?*

Under circumstances like the one you describe, it may make more sense to share a pastor than merge. This option needs to be carefully considered, as two parishes will demand more administrative work than one (merged) parish. Under either structure—merged or clustered—considerable reflection is needed on the question, “What do we need to preserve in each parish community.”

19. *Is it really possible for one pastor to adequately pastor two large parishes?*

In many parts of the country, the question has become, “Is it really possible for a pastor to adequately pastor more than 5 parishes?” Your question has been answered affirmatively in these areas of the nation—at issue is how much help he gets from deacons and the laity. It’s unclear what you mean by “large parishes,” but it is doubtful that at this stage, two of our largest parishes would be clustered.

20. *Will there be two or more separate catechetical programs or will they merge?*

This will be an important question for the pastor and his councils. Should two catechesis programs sharing a pastor merge? Are they in two languages? Is one classroom style and the other family-based? Are there two PCLs? These and other factors will influence the pastor’s final decision. So the answer is “maybe/maybe not.”

21. *If there is sharing of resources, how long before parishioners are comfortable with the changes?*

Much of the answer depends on the degree of resources that are shared in a Multiple Parish Pastoring situation. That said, there is something about journeying through a liturgical year together that helps people feel more comfortable. After one year, the comfort level typically increases dramatically, and then incrementally from there.

22. *How will we convince people that this other path, while different, is not invalid? That we will not be a less blessed people or a less Catholic people?*

Good catechesis on what it means to be a Catholic community is essential. According to Canon Law (Canon 515), “A parish is a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor (parochus) as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop.” So the legitimacy of the parish is not threatened by the sharing of a pastor with another parish.

23. *Will we push small church groups again as a way of connecting people to Catholic heritage in the absence of a lot of parish activities?*

While small groups do contribute to parish vitality, there is no assumption built into Multiple Parish Pastoring that there will be fewer parish activities. Consider, for example, the possibility that one parish will have organizations that the other does not have (such as a St. Vincent de Paul Society). Perhaps these new organizations will attract members from the other parish. In such a situation, the clustering contributes to additional parish activity.



Future Staffing of PARISHES

DIOCESE OF METUCHEN

FALL 2011

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. *I understand that there are two options for parishes to consolidate: merging (two parishes becoming one) or clustering (parishes remain separate but share some of the resources). Are there other forms of consolidation that are being considered?*

There are four strategies in the Bishop’s Future Staffing of Parishes Plan:

- (1) Doubling the ordinations rate to four/year,
- (2) Multiple Parish Pastoring: Establishing one new cluster of parishes each year that would share a pastor but remain separate parishes,
- (3) Continuing the Renewing the Church restructuring process in 1-2 regions of the Diocese each year (the only strategy which involves consolidation), and
- (4) adding one new international priest to the Diocese each year. Each of these strategies will be implemented for five years and then evaluated.

2. *Is there a merger plan already in place?*

There is no master plan to merge parishes. Mergers can occur when the Bishop of Metuchen identifies an area for the “Renewing the Church” process during which pastors and parishioners are asked to participate in a pastoral study and then send to him recommendations for restructuring. Such a process, which usually takes about a year, has been completed in Carteret and South Edison/Highland Park, and is underway in Perth Amboy.

3. *Who decides which parishes merge?*

After receiving recommendations, the Bishop of the Diocese of Metuchen, Bishop Paul Bootkoski makes his decisions about restructuring parishes and missions as well as assigning future “clusters” of parishes that will share a pastor through consultative processes.

4. *What are the key milestones that will take place once a parish has been designated to be consolidated (merged, clustered, etc.)? What is the duration of the process to consolidate? When will parishioners be notified that their parish might be consolidated?*

The short answer is “It depends.” Parishes that are clustered are not being consolidated. They are being staffed by the same pastor. There may be some sharing of staff and consultation from a “cluster council,” but that would be cooperation not consolidation. The advance notice on clustering would vary—mainly because of the circumstances of priests. A retirement is easier to plan for than a death. In the case of a true consolidation, current pastors and parishioners would be invited to participate in the Renewing the Church process, which usually takes about nine months to develop a concrete proposal for the Bishop, followed by six to twelve months of implementation efforts, to work out the pastoral and administrative details of mergers.

5. Will parishioners have an influence over which form of consolidation their parish might take.

Yes, delegates from each parish involved in a Renewing the Church process meet monthly to learn more about their neighbors, study the needs of the Church in that area, reflect on the demographics, and understand what each parish has to offer. After about nine months, the group of delegates (called a “discernment team”) makes recommendations to the Bishop. Throughout this period, these delegates have stayed in touch with parishioners, usually through the parish pastoral council.

6. What criteria are used to determine which parishes merge or cluster?



The consultative processes (including Renewing the Church restructuring processes, the Mission Parish Review, and the Deanery Council Consultation on Multiple Parish Pastoring) look at proximity of parishes, sustainability of priestly staffing, finances, physical plants, demographics including underserved populations, and parish traditions and vitality across many indicators. We have learned that there is no easy formula for making these decisions! It takes good data, but prayerful conversations are the best way to surface good recommendations for our Bishop.

7. I am wondering if there is a formula for determining merging. For example within a radius of 10 miles there can only be one church if there is less than “x” number of registered Catholics in that area.

There are not rigid criteria for these decisions, but rather areas of consideration. The example you give is based on numbers of Catholics in a given area. Such criteria will always favor Catholics in the urban and suburban areas of our diocese. If we were to rigidly follow a population-based formula, we would have only a handful of priests to minister in Hunterdon and Warren Counties, half of the territory of the Diocese. So it’s helpful to think in these terms, but we can only take it so far.



8. Will merges be geographical or could there be parishes with a shared pastor that are a significant distance apart? Will people be able to have a sense of a local community - even an expanded one- or will the pastor be leading flocks that are strangers to each other?

You are really asking two questions. First, clustered parishes in other dioceses can be 120 miles apart, on different islands, across mountain ranges, and face other geographic realities that we are fortunate not to have to deal with. So it depends on what you mean by significant. Generally, distances between parishes in the Diocese of Metuchen would be smaller than the average in the United States for parishes sharing a pastor. Second, clustered parishes vary in the degree of collaboration they engage in. Some continue on as very separate entities. Others share staff, ministries, and are guided by a “cluster council” in addition to their parish pastoral council. Some get so close they ask to merge, although this occurs infrequently.

9. If there are two very large, viable parishes in the same town, will they merge together because of locale or will they merge with a smaller parish not in the immediate vicinity?

This may be frustrating, but the answer to your question is again “ It depends.” All of the options would need to be studied closely. For the right priest, leading two vibrant parishes in the same town might be an exciting challenge. Such a pastor would need ample support from deacons and laypeople. On the other hand, the big/small combination would provide less of a challenge administratively and pastorally. Yet, at the same time, around the nation, many of the big/small combinations result in ill-feeling from parishioners in the small parish who feel neglected.

10. If a parish is viable, still attracting new members, etc. does it also have to merge?

Our use of Multiple Parish Pastoring is based on a shortage of priests, not parish vitality. If parishes need restructuring because of financial pressures or a dwindling congregation, they would be candidates for the Renewing the Church process. Viable and even vital parishes may still share a pastor.

11. If two parishes are merged, what are the criteria for deciding which parish physically remains, and which one is closed? What will happen to the closed parish’s facilities?

If two parishes are merged, a new parish is created. The new parish’s pastoral council works with the pastor to then determine which properties are essential to accomplish the mission of the parish and which could be put toward new uses, sold, or rented. The church buildings could both be kept open; there is no requirement that one church be closed. But other buildings (a recent merger left a parish with three rectories, two parish centers and a vacant convent) may enrich the parish by being turned into an asset like cash that could be used prudently to support the maintenance of the worship sites.

12. If two or more parishes are clustered will the financial bookkeeping remain separate or consolidated?

The two parishes would remain separate and would therefore require separate bookkeeping.



STAFFING

13. What do mergers and multiple parish pastoring mean for staff of each parish? Are staff let go in both cases?

Once the new pastor is appointed and the number of staff or the degree of sharing staff is determined, the pastor will need to make important decisions in this area. If there is a strict separation of the parishes, the staffs in each parish may not be affected at all. But if there is a sharing of staff, it may make sense to eliminate redundancies.

14. What education will there be for staff that become part of a larger parish organization?

One of the outcomes of the First Synod of the Diocese of Metuchen was the call for a new Office of Parish Leadership Formation. When established, this office will be responsible for making sure that parish staff are aware of the Future Staffing of Parishes Policy and the skills they will need to become more effective under new kinds of parish structures.

15. Will the roles of deacons and laity expand to fill some of the duties normally covered by priests (excepting the sacraments, of course)? Will the Diocese or local Catholic universities offer training for those who are called to fill those needs?

Absolutely. Bishop Paul Bootkoski sees new roles for laypeople and deacons as crucial for the success of Multiple Parish Pastoring, one of the three primary strategies of his Future Staffing Policy. Think about it like this—if a pastor widens the scope of his leadership to encompass two or three parishes, what can he be helped with to lighten the load? Either administrative duties or pastoral duties that do not require a priest come to mind. For this reason, Bishop Bootkoski has created two new positions: Parish Coordinator and Business Administrator. These positions may be held by a deacon, layperson, or religious.

LITURGY

16. Will parishes start to celebrate other forms of worship in lieu of Masses?

If the priest shortage deepens as projected, there may come a time when Sunday Mass cannot be celebrated in every church every week, and people will have to attend Mass in a neighboring church on given Sundays. In cases where it becomes impossible for the faithful of a parish to attend Mass (e.g. a great distance to be traveled or the sudden illness of a priest, a liturgy of the word or “Communion service” could be led by a deacon, layperson, or religious.

