



What's a Cluster of Parishes?

“Yes, I know what plans I have in mind for you, Yahweh declares, plans for peace, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. When you call to me and come and pray to me, I shall listen to you. When you search for me, you will find me; when you search wholeheartedly for me, I shall let you find me, Yahweh declares.”

Jeremiah 29: 11 -14

A major step in *Vibrant Parish Life – Phase II* is about discerning cluster partners and then working together in clusters of parishes to plan for the future staffing and configuring of our parishes for the next 5-10 years. But this raises some questions. What is a cluster of parishes? Why are we forming them? What do we hope to achieve through this process? Here are some answers.

What is the purpose of forming clusters of parishes?

The use of clusters of parishes is a means to assure that every area in our Diocese has a strong lasting Catholic presence and a healthy ministry situation for priests and ministers.

Forming clusters of parishes is a strategy to:

- Provide a vibrant Catholic community to all the people of a given area
- Create intentional, long-term commitments to collaboration by 2 or more parishes
- Respond to the need to better serve the mission of the Church through planning for the future staffing and reconfiguring of parishes. This may include sharing priests, deacons, parish staff, and lay ecclesial ministers, and actively engaging the gifts of all the baptized

Why are we forming clusters of parishes?

The formation of clusters of parishes is an approach that is consistent with what it means to be Church and reflects the three guiding principles of the *Vibrant Parish Life* initiative: communio, subsidiarity and collaboration as the body of Christ. It provides an ongoing way to address the reality of continuously changing pastoral needs by those closest to each local situation.

This is a proven strategy being used in dioceses across the country when faced with fewer priests and similar pastoral challenges. Dioceses whose planning efforts have received the most positive assessments by pastors have used clusters of parishes. While the actual meaning and details of clusters varies in different dioceses, the emphasis upon inter-parish cooperation is a common foundation.

The formation of clusters of parishes and the need for a more clear vision, direction and parameters to address the future staffing of our parishes were top priorities in a diocesan consultation conducted in early 2005. Over 1100 parish leaders responded.

What is a cluster of parishes?

A cluster is a group of parishes committed to a long term relationship of collaboration to plan and provide pastoral care for these communities. In forming this relationship, each parish has its own parish identity, canonical status and financial accountability. Clusters will be formed through a process of consultation and discernment, with final approval by the Bishop.

What does a cluster of parishes do together?

A cluster of parishes engages in the work of pastoral planning for the parishes in the cluster. After clusters of parishes have been discerned and finalized by April 30, 2007, parishes will form a "Cluster Planning Team" with clergy and lay representatives from each parish. Following diocesan training sessions in May/June of 2007, this team will gather relevant information and develop long and short term plans (next 5-10 years, next 1-2 years) to address priorities discerned from the planning areas listed below. This work will include contingency plans to address projections for having fewer priests available over these time periods. A diocesan committee will provide flexible resources to guide this work, and will present specific models that might better serve pastoral needs for a given cluster to consider. Following consultation and approval, the resulting plans will be implemented by parish leaders in subsequent years, and updated as needed. These plans will also be used by diocesan staff to guide the appointment of priests and other pastoral decisions.

What areas of planning and pastoral care might be addressed by a cluster of parishes?

- Coordinating Mass schedules (daily, weekend, holyday, times of special need)
- Providing Sacramental ministries and non-Eucharistic worship
- Promoting life-giving ministry and living situations that foster priestly fellowship, mutual support
- Developing staffing configurations that involve priests, deacons, lay ecclesial ministers, parish life coordinators, business managers, lay leaders...
- Sharing parish ministries and administration (faith formation, social justice and outreach, youth/young adults, seniors, evangelization...)
- Sustaining the presence of a Catholic School
- Coordinating institutional ministries (hospitals, nursing homes, prisons)
- Addressing unique or changing language and cultural needs
- Making wise use of facilities and buildings
- Assuring sound finances
- Planning needed reconfiguration of parish structures and ministries to address these needs

Going Deeper:

1. How will the formation of clusters of parishes help our diocese to serve the mission and ministry of the Church in new and better ways?
2. How can we listen to, respect, and respond positively to the need to collaborate across parish boundaries?
3. What have been the benefits of past and present cooperation with other parishes?
4. What might our parish gain by forming a cluster partnership with other parishes?
What can we best contribute to this cluster partnership?

Next week: Number 10 in our VPL series.... "How Do We Discern Cluster Partners?"