

Next steps important in the clustering process

by The Most Reverend Richard G. Lennon, Bishop, Diocese of Cleveland

Easter joy fills our hearts and the life of the Church! The great Paschal Triduum, the Octave of Easter, and the entire 50 days of the Easter season communicate to us and deepen within us the gift of eternal life in the risen savior. This eternal life is a dynamism and a call to vibrancy that the Church of Cleveland received several years ago in Bishop Pilla's Vibrant Parish Life initiative. In this Easter season, we are entering a new and important step in the Vibrant Parish Life clustering process. May the power of the Holy Spirit and the gift of eternal life guide us in this period of communication, consultation, consensus and, finally, recommendation.

For eight months now all of the 69 cluster planning teams within the diocese have been meeting in response to my May 2007 letter calling all of our parishes to a new and revitalized mission employing the rich resources of the Church for the sake of building up the kingdom of God, evangelizing all peoples, and sanctifying the faithful everywhere in our diocese.

The task of each cluster planning committee was to first identify the resources and realities within the cluster. This first stage of the process involved honest and detailed sharing, prayerful reflection and an openness to a renewed understanding of the mission of our diocesan Church and the equitable distribution of our resources throughout our diocese for the future. This conversation demanded great dedication and generosity from everyone. I am edified by all the sincere effort that has been put forth. I see this work as an expression of the eternal and vibrant life we celebrate this Easter.

Communicating all of this insight to the wider parish community has been a challenge for the cluster teams. The communications liaison for each cluster planning team has had the responsibility to prepare informational updates for each of the parishes in the cluster. Helping the parishioners of each parish to appreciate the complexities of clustering and the demands of Vibrant Parish Life is no small task; it is one that we must intensify going forward. Parish bulletin announcements, newsletter articles, town hall meetings, and parish council updates are just a few of the means by which the cluster planning teams can keep the parishes informed about this important work.

Communication is fundamental to the next phase of the process. The cluster planning teams have been discerning what may be a responsible plan for the cluster. These plans are to address the issues of evangelization, the increased participation of the faithful in Sunday Mass, as well as specific issues particular to each cluster (in some cases fewer parishes, schools, and clergy).

Finally, the plan must be financially sound, meaning that parish collections must be sufficient to support all ministries. In this new phase of the process these plans are to be presented to each parish pastoral council, finance council, and the parishioners at

large so that people may know what is being proposed and so team members may hear from their fellow parishioners.

Consultation is the goal. In the next three months these plans are to be presented to the parish communities with an explanation of the proposed plan by the parish cluster team. Feedback from the parishioners is to be received. The insights and wisdom of the wider community will be taken into consideration by the planning team and help them fine tune the proposed plan. This phase also will provide important formation for parishioners, that is, giving them a fuller understanding of the life and mission of the Church going forward. Formation and consultation within the parishes is of the utmost importance as the clustering process moves toward its goal: a recommendation to the bishop.

The goal of these first two stages of the cluster planning process is the presentation of a recommendation to me. As the bishop of the diocese, after having heard much advice and counsel, I have the responsibility and the burden of making these challenging decisions concerning the nature and shape of the pastoral ministry for our diocese. The cluster planning process will provide essential input and wisdom from those most directly involved in and responsible for the day to day ministry in our parishes.

Beginning in September the first set of recommendations will be submitted to my office. With the assistance of the Vibrant Parish Life II Task Force and my staff, these recommendations will be considered. In February I will promulgate the definitive plan for pastoral ministry in each of our 69 clusters. By the end of June 2010 these plans will be fully implemented and our entire diocesan Church will be poised to move into the future with a more vibrant, stronger, and energized pastoral ministry, thereby addressing the challenges of the mission of the Church.

So, these Easter days of light and life will be days of communication, formation, and consultation for our parishes and our clustering planning teams. May the spirit of communion and cooperation that has marked the first stages of this process be even more prevalent in this new phase.

As I said in my installation homily almost two years ago, let us pray that together we as a local Church might more perfectly embody the faith described in the Acts of the Apostles in which “the devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.” This Easter hope and life is our call to vibrancy. May the Risen Lord abide with us and guide us in his ways.

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