

# Building the future: A call to embrace renewal and restructuring in the Diocese of Erie



*Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,*

For only the second time during my ten years as the bishop of the Diocese of Erie, I am writing a pastoral letter\* to the clergy, women and men religious and lay faithful of the diocese.

Parishioners sometimes ask me how they can help me in my role as bishop. In addition to prayer, one of the most important things they can do is to take advantage of the materials we publish. To that end, I encourage you to read this letter thoughtfully and prayerfully, and to discuss it with family members and friends, especially fellow parishioners.

We are, always have been and always will be a church on a mission. We are called not only to care for the souls of those who are already in our parishes, but also to invite others into the community Christ established on earth.

In our ongoing effort to create parish communities that are vibrant, dynamic and able to welcome parishioners old and new, we are embarking on another more formal round of parish restructuring.

It is surprising to see how much we have been through as a diocese in the eight short years since we first began pastoral planning:

- We implemented the first round of both school and parish restructuring. (2015-17)
- We transitioned from religious education to a mindset of lifelong faith formation, including the introduction of confirmation being offered at a younger age. (2018-21)
- We instituted several significant changes in administrative staffing at the diocesan level. (2014-present)
- We received and responded to the 2018 Pennsylvania Statewide Grand Jury Report
- We responded to the many changing aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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\*My first pastoral letter, *Re-membering Our Sunday Story: A pastoral letter in pandemic*, can be found at [www.ErieRCD.org/SundayStory.html](http://www.ErieRCD.org/SundayStory.html).



As the data we commissioned in 2015 predicted, our realities also have changed significantly. As expected, the number of practicing Catholics in our diocese has declined steeply, as has the number of active priests available to serve in parishes. Attendance in our Catholic schools continues to decrease as well.

- While the general population in our diocese has dropped from 875,200 in 1990 to 813,513 in 2022 (a loss of seven percent), the number of people attending Sunday Mass in our diocese went from 120,000 in 1990 to 26,770 in 2022. That's a 78 percent decrease. These numbers underscore the reason significant adjustments must be made.
- The number of students in our Catholic schools has dropped by 38 percent since 2013/14, while the number of students attending faith formation has gone down by 53 percent.
- The number of parishes in our diocese during these same timeframes changed from 127 in 1990 to 117 in 2012 and 93 in 2023.
- And finally, we consider the number of active priests serving in the diocese over the past three decades:  
1990 - 210  
2012 - 130  
2023 - 92  
Based on recent experience, we estimate that number will be around 60 by 2031, just eight years from now.

I understand the pandemic and the grand jury report hastened much of this decline. But that does not change our current realities.

It's important to remember that in much of the world, and even in much of our country, the church is growing and showing lots of signs of vibrancy. But we have to respond to our situation here in northwest Pennsylvania. As you know, we are experiencing the same challenges as much of the northeast and mid-Atlantic states. In the Diocese of Erie, we need to regroup today to build a strong foundation for tomorrow. That foundation will carry us through some lean years ahead, as we prepare for a brighter future down the road.



## Looking at the entire diocese

I like to imagine the earliest days of our diocese, which was founded in 1853. The first bishops who served our diocese were true frontier bishops who had to travel by horse or train to various parishes and missions in northwest Pennsylvania. Communities could go several months between visits with the bishop and priests.

Eventually in the 1950s and 60s, the pendulum swung the other way, and we actually had more priests available than parishes in need. In fact, some parishes were established as a direct result of the availability of priests. Those years were the anomaly, and of course, those days are long gone.

We must face the situation before us with confidence, faith and hope. Each generation has different challenges and needs to make adjustments in response to its situation. It should not surprise us that sacrifice will be involved as we continue listening to the Holy Spirit and responding to the call of missionary discipleship and evangelization.

We are the largest diocese, geographically, in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Our geography includes everything from mid-sized and small urban cities connected by four-lane highways to very small hamlets accessible only by two-lane, country roads. In some areas, it is possible to walk between churches. In others, there may be 30 miles between them. Decisions about the future need to be made with the entire diocese in mind. We have the responsibility to care for all of the souls in our diocese.

We have been richly blessed by the sacrifices and vision of those who came before us. Many of them overcame great challenges to establish parishes and schools. I think in particular of the storied group of farmers who walked to Pittsburgh in the mid-1840s to secure a bank loan to build St. Patrick Church in Erie when no one in Erie would take the risk. They agreed to mortgage their farms, their very livelihood, to make it possible. It is now our turn to think about those who will come after us. What needs to happen so that future generations of Catholics can not only survive but thrive within faith-filled communities of worship?

Our churches are beautiful and we have strong attachments to them. We are comfortable in the parish communities many of us have known our entire lives. But Jesus asked us to go out and proclaim the good news, not to keep the buildings we inherited open at all costs.

So, if our mission is to care for souls, celebrate the Eucharist, proclaim and live the Gospel, catechize the faithful and help others develop a personal relationship with Christ, we have no choice but to be open to change. We all belong to the Diocese of Erie and we have the responsibility to ensure that the needs of all our sisters and brothers are met as we plan for the future.



## Planning as a way of life

When we implemented our first round of parish restructuring as part of the efforts that began in 2015, I often commented on the need for us to develop a mindset that embraced planning and change as a way of life. I know some parishes at that time felt fortunate they would not experience change. While that's understandable, I trust at some level, all parishioners knew that would not always be the case.

I am grateful that numerous groups of parishes responded to my invitation to continue planning at the local level after we implemented the first round of changes in 2017. Several parishes had great success with this process, and we have shared their stories in *Faith* magazine and the *Diocese of Erie*-news.

Planning and change is not easy, but several realities in our diocese make it essential that we take significant action this year. I reiterate that the primary reason we must take this step is that all Catholics deserve to be part of vibrant, dynamic communities that help them grow in their relationship with Christ. The loss of population in northwest Pennsylvania, the decline in the number of practicing Catholics and the finite number of priests available both now and into the foreseeable future all are factors in the decision to restructure.

After consulting with numerous advisors, both clergy and laity, and thanks to assistance from the Catholic Foundation of Northwest Pennsylvania, I have decided to engage the services of Meitler Consultants to provide us with updated statistics that will help us lay the foundation for our future. We are fortunate they are familiar with our diocese, having accompanied us during the first phase of planning. I want to ensure that our diocese is right-sized and prepared for a new era of evangelization. My hope is also to develop our best thinking for a plan that can be implemented well into the future.

## A brief look back

As noted earlier, we went through a formal, diocesan-wide pastoral planning effort beginning in 2015. We worked on five priorities: school restructuring, parish restructuring, vocations, faith formation and organizational restructuring. This time around, we are focused solely on parish restructuring.

The original plan of parish restructuring, which took us from 117 parishes to 97 through a series of mergers and partnerships, was implemented in February 2017. It was achieved using a process that included:

- Presentations of data to pastors and parish leaders followed by opportunity for feedback
- Presentation of a preliminary plan followed by the opportunity for all parishioners to offer feedback
- Presentation of the final plan.



While hard decisions had to be made, I am pleased that every person in the diocese who wanted to comment on the situation or to propose a particular change, was given the opportunity to do so. In many cases, the feedback led to significant adjustments before the plan was finalized.

The effort we are about to embark on this year is similar. But first I want to review one other aspect of planning that has occurred in the interim as the result of regional and local initiatives.

Although we do not have a Planning Office, I created an informal committee available to assist parishes that wanted to continue planning locally and regionally. We developed a guide for this which can be found under the Definitions, Prayers and Resources tab at [www.ErieRCD.org/Planning.html](http://www.ErieRCD.org/Planning.html). I am grateful to the volunteer facilitators within the diocese who led parishes through the process. Some parishes requested that I close church buildings they no longer needed; others requested mergers in order to strengthen their communities.

During this timeframe, we have seen the Catholic Community of Meadville merge three parishes into the new Epiphany of the Lord Parish as well as St. Francis Parish in Bradford merge into St. Bernard of Clairvaux in Bradford. The five parishes in the DuBois region have taken initial steps to create a plan for their region as well.

While these efforts are encouraging, we no longer have the luxury of addressing individual situations. It is time to begin the next diocesan-wide phase of pastoral planning. Thus, we procured the services of Meitler Consultants.

We already have shared new data with priests and parish leaders in McKean and Potter counties, Venango and Clarion counties, Clearfield County and Erie County. Plans are also in the works to do the same for Cameron, Crawford, Elk and Mercer counties.

## **The clergy of the Diocese of Erie**

While the decline of population — and more significantly, the decline of the number of practicing Catholics in our region — is significant, I cannot share my thoughts about planning without taking the time to discuss our clergy.

As I write this letter, we have four parishes without pastors: St. Thomas in Corry, St. Teresa in Union City, and Our Mother of Sorrows as well as Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Erie. From what I can see, it is not going to get any better. Even if the Lord blessed us with a significant increase in vocations, our needs would outpace our ability to meet them in the coming years.



Many people have proposed bringing international priests into the equation. Although I recognize it has possibilities, that step also would be years in the making while we negotiate with international dioceses. Our needs are immediate.

It is important that we assign our priests in such a way that areas with great distances between parishes continue to be served for as long as possible. This means that more of our urban areas will be experiencing parish restructuring.

One of the responsibilities I have is to care for our priests. Their spiritual, physical and mental wellbeing is a high priority. In recent years, we have created many opportunities for retreats, days of recollection, fellowship and communication, all with their renewal in mind.

It is no surprise that many of our younger priests are especially keen to see planning for the future implemented. They are as familiar with the statistics as anyone and know that the road ahead is full of challenges. At the other end of the spectrum, many of our priests are preparing to retire after a lifetime of service. This is yet another aspect of the big picture. We have to move forward in ways that are manageable for everyone.

To that end, I ask that parishioners make every effort to be as supportive of their pastors as they can during pastoral planning. We all are in the same boat. While commiserating with each other is understandable, complaining will not advance the cause. I, of course, encourage charity, generosity and optimism on the part of our clergy as well.

I invite you to make a special effort to pray and sacrifice for the priests who serve you in the coming months. I have no doubt that prayer will play a key role in the success of this initiative.

Pastoral planning and its implementation is the responsibility of all of us. We must rise to the challenge. Is it going to be easy? No. Will there be a sense of loss, and will accepting the changes be difficult? Yes. Jesus said we would have to take up our cross to follow him. He also said he would send the Spirit to be with us.

## **Planning, timeframe, logistics**

Planning is a complex process with many moving parts. Demographics and geography are important, as are statistics. Additional considerations include how restructuring impacts schools and faith formation efforts. What other outreach efforts, including nursing homes, hospitals, college campuses and prisons depend on the services of clergy in the region? How can we assist our priests who will be charged with helping parishioners as communities merge or partner with each other?



When we introduced pastoral planning beginning in 2015, we involved all of the parishes in the diocese at the same time. While the process will remain similar, this time we are addressing parish planning region by region.

Here is a quick look at how the process is being rolled out or will be rolled out in each region of the diocese:

- Data and statistics prepared by Meitler Consultants is made available to pastors and parish leaders. Together, sometimes in concert with other parishes in the region, they provide diocesan administrators with their thoughts on what steps could be taken to ensure the vibrancy of their parish and to use resources in the most efficient way possible.
- Studying the information submitted from all the parishes in a particular region, as well as the demographic information and the resources available — including clergy — diocesan administrators develop a preliminary plan for each region. They then meet with pastors and parish leaders to present the preliminary plan.
- After the meeting, the preliminary plan is posted on the planning microsite created for this purpose. It already features information for the regions that have been through the first part of the process and will be expanded as other regions become more involved. The site includes a copy of this letter as well as links to key slides detailing the preliminary plans for each deanery as they become available. Find it at [www.ErieRCD.org/Planning.html](http://www.ErieRCD.org/Planning.html).
- The people who live and worship in each region are in the best position to provide insight into whether or not proposed changes are workable and/or if adjustments to the plan are advisable. Once it is made public, all members of the parishes involved in a preliminary plan are invited to provide individual feedback. At the appropriate time, a link to an online survey is made available on the planning website; pastors also receive hard copies of the survey for those who prefer to weigh in using paper and pen. Helpful insights and constructive ideas are encouraged. It is a vital resource to those involved in creating final plans.
- We also ask for an official response from each pastor, formulated with his leadership team. Then, using all the feedback provided, the final plan is created and presented to the Priest Council for approval before it is shared with the parishes involved.



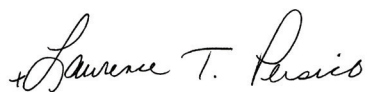
I cannot emphasize strongly enough that although our structures may change, the mission Christ gave us to go forth and make disciples remains. As inspiring as that sounds, we all know it requires a great deal of sacrifice, generosity and willingness to walk through challenges with the faith that Christ accompanies us. The fact is, we are in the situation of examining what we *can* do and what we *need* to do, not necessarily what we might *like* to do.

Our pastoral planning prayer asks for “the vision to see new paths of possibility” as well as “the strength to be unafraid of what is new.” This is a moment that calls for all of us, clergy and laity alike, to let go of some of our old ways of doing things. Once we have defined the changes in parish status that need to take place, I also intend to assist parishes with creating more efficiencies such as sharing programming or staff including business managers and youth ministers. No one disagrees that collaboration can be beneficial. We need to take better advantage it.

I want to remind you we must respond to the situation in which we find ourselves, and we must listen to our community, to one another and to what God is asking of us. I ask that you bring this process to prayer, and that you also pray for vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and consecrated life. We can have every confidence in the future if we truly trust, discern and bring the Holy Spirit into the process.

I look forward to working with you in a collaborative spirit, knowing we are doing what needs to be done to live out our mission and create parish communities that are vibrant, life-giving places of worship where people find encouragement and hope as they grow in their relationship with Christ, his church and each other.

*Sincerely yours in Christ,*



The Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico  
Bishop of Erie

