

Frequently Asked Questions About Clusters of Parishes (Part 1)



“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 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. *What will be the impact of clustering on parish identity?*

Clustering, by itself, does not change the parish identity, canonical status or the financial responsibilities, accounts and resources of individual parishes.

A cluster is a group of parishes committed to a long term relationship of collaboration to plan and provide pastoral care for their communities. Clustered parishes retain their own members, but work out ways of sharing staffing, programs, ministries and resources with one another to best meet the needs of Catholics and others in the cluster area. In these situations, each parish would be responsible to give the financial support as negotiated among the parishes.

Cluster participation does not supersede parish affiliation. If multiple parishes share an RCIA program, for example, the catechumens and candidates are initiated into the Church as members of the parish through which they came. They are not parishioners of the cluster. The same is the case with Baptisms, First Communion, Confirmations, Marriages and Funerals. If a sacrament is administered in one parish by a priest from another parish, the recording of the sacrament is at the parish where the sacrament is celebrated.

Some concerns about the loss of parish identity center around parish uniqueness, or the particular charism of a parish. Does parish uniqueness – often the reason parishioners affiliate with a parish – suffer as a result of clustering? This is not likely. Rather, clustering might enhance parish identity by improving parish ministries offered or strengthened through collaboration. In addition, clustering may make parishioners aware of what is unique about their parish, just like traveling in a foreign country makes you more aware of American culture. Parish leaders can foster parish identity by talking about and highlighting each parish’s uniqueness.

2. *How will working as a cluster affect possible future changes in parish status such as merging, consolidation or closing?*

In certain cases, after working together for some time, parish leaders and communities in a cluster may decide that changes such as a merger, consolidation or the closing of facilities or parishes are needed as the only way to sustain a stronger and long-term presence of the mission and ministry of the Church in the cluster area. In these situations, parish identity, canonical status and fiscal responsibilities would be changed based on the recommendations of the cluster parishes and approval by the Bishop.

3. *What is the anticipated role of laity in cluster leadership and planning?*

Rooted in their Baptismal call and gifts, the laity will be very important in the work of clusters. Once clusters have been agreed upon by the parishes involved and approved by the Bishop, a cluster planning team with representatives from each parish will be formed. Membership will typically include the pastor and 2-3 lay leaders from each parish, including representatives of the parish pastoral council, finance council and other key leaders. Further details will be provided when these teams are to be formed in May of 2007. The team will plan priorities and directions for how the parishes will share staffing and ministry, considering both the next 5-10 years, as well as the next 1-2 years. This planning will in turn involve parish staff and lay leaders related to the specific areas of ministry being named as priorities.

There is also a key consultative role of the laity in the discernment of clusters of parishes. For example, in the first stage of the clustering process, parishes will be asked to form an ad-hoc committee to discern and submit 2 – 3 potential cluster configurations to the diocese for consideration. Members of this committee would include representatives of the parish pastoral council, finance council, pastoral staff and other parish leaders. In creating these proposals, consultation should be done with the respective councils and staff to discern what makes sense. Consultation will also be done when proposed cluster configurations are sent by the diocese to the individual parishes for feedback. Further, as plans are created by the cluster planning team, consultation with the broader parish communities, and feedback and approval from the pastoral council and finance council will be needed at appropriate times.

4. *Does the diocese have a variety of cluster models in mind to fit different parish settings (e.g., urban, suburban, rural) and situations (e.g., wealthy, poor, large, small)? Or is this a “one size fits all” approach?*

We hope that flexibility and creativity in fostering the mission of the church characterize the cluster relationships that develop. We recognize that one size (or model) does not fit all. The diocese will provide a variety of practical cluster models used in other dioceses that may fit diverse parish situations in our diocese. At the onset of the clustering process, all parishes will start out as distinct communities working in collaboration. Further resources and models will be provided by diocesan staff to individual clusters as needed or when appropriate. We believe that cluster relationships need to make sense and accomplish what they are meant to do: namely, to plan and provide pastoral care for their communities. This process will respect the role of diocesan staff in presenting specific models for consideration that might better serve pastoral needs, and the wisdom of parish leaders in knowing what cluster model best makes sense in their situation.

5. *You are looking for a configuration of 2 – 6 parishes with a minimum of about 2,000 households. Should numbers be the driving force behind cluster configurations?*

No. Numbers by themselves should not be the driving force. But numbers do provide a bench mark to begin the conversation, providing some objective criteria to weigh in decision-making. Subjective criteria like mission, geography, neighborhood needs, common history, existing relationships and partnerships, ethnic and language needs are also important considerations. Both objective and subjective criteria need to be considered when proposing cluster configurations for subsequent review and approval.

Going Deeper:

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

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