

How Do We Discern Cluster Partners?



Discernment is based upon an understanding of the mission of the Church as participation in the mission and activity of God. From the time of the early Church, Christians have gathered to pray, to share wisdom, to reflect and to make choices. Discernment demands prayer, insight, listening and surrender to God's will. (VPL-Phase I Self-study materials)

This phase of *Vibrant Parish Life* 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. How do we choose cluster partners? Based on what criteria?

What do we mean by discernment?

First of all, this is a process of discernment. Discernment is the disciplined and honest attempt to discover what God is doing in our lives and what God's will is for us in these times. We need to center our deliberations in a process of prayer, making ourselves open to what God is asking of us in this time. Our reflection needs to address our capacity to better serve the pastoral needs of our area and wider community through forming a long term relationship with other parishes as the Body of Christ.

What basic steps will be taken?

A process of consultation and prayerful discernment will be used based on an 8-step process given to parish leaders.

- STEP 1: Form an ad-hoc Parish Subcommittee to Discern Proposals for Cluster Partners.
- STEP 2: Review overall work of the ad-hoc Parish Subcommittee: process of prayer and discernment; purpose of a cluster of parishes, criteria to consider, steps, timeline.
- STEP 3: Review background information about other parishes (map of district parishes, demographic and sacramental trends, parish self-studies from Phase I).
- STEP 4: Propose possible cluster partners and related configurations and rationale.
- STEP 5: Discern and rank preference for 2-3 configurations of cluster partners to recommend with rationales based on the criteria provided. Consult with parish leaders and groups.
- STEP 6: Fill out and submit "Proposal of Cluster Partners Form" by October 1.
- STEP 7: Receive first draft overall plan of cluster configurations from diocesan team and provide feedback to diocese.
- STEP 8: Finalize configuration of cluster partners with approval by Bishop.

To assist parishes, the *Vibrant Parish Life – Phase II* Committee has produced a list of possible criteria that are intended as points of consideration and not absolute standards, based on the experiences of other dioceses. Some of these criteria are more *objective*, or quantifiable; others are more *subjective*, or relational. Different criteria will be more or less relevant in different areas.

Objective Criteria:

Size of a parish cluster in households:

- Typically 2-6 parishes, minimum of about 2000 households.

Manageable geography for ministers and people:

- Drive times in minutes between parishes - Urban: 10-15 Suburban: 10-20 Rural: 20-30.
- Availability of public transportation options where appropriate.

Sacramental needs (especially funerals, weddings, Baptisms):

- One example: Minimum of (# Baptisms) + (# Funerals) + (# Weddings) = 100 or more for a cluster.

Over

Objective Criteria: - continued

Workload:

- Ideally, no priest will be expected to regularly say more than three Masses of Sunday obligation, including Saturday Vigil Masses, each weekend (based on Code of Canon Law).
- No pastor/administrator/parish life coordinator will typically be assigned to more than 2 parishes.

Current Guidelines for the assignment of priests in our diocese that affect clustering:

- 2800 households to qualify for an associate pastor.
- 500 households to qualify for a full-time pastor.

Subjective Criteria:

Shared Mission/ Workable Fit

- Do the cluster parishes share a sense of common mission and resonance that can embrace differences, share complimentary gifts and effectively address unique needs (language/ethnicity needs, culture).

Geography:

- Do the parishes share a common geographic area as defined by a city, neighborhood, roadway corridor, school district, or other contiguous area? (including crossing district/other boundaries)

Neighborhood Needs:

- Does the cluster enhance the capacity of parishes to serve wider community needs in the surrounding neighborhoods? What is the wider community asking of parishes in working together to better serve the common good?

Existing Relationship:

- Do the parishes have a relationship of continuing collaboration to build upon? (including *Church in the City* partnerships, past or present shared ministries...)

Common History:

- Is there a 'mother – daughter' parish relationship or a past/continuing relationship with a particular religious order?

Capacity for Cluster Work

- Can the parishes in the proposed cluster effectively do what a cluster does for the long term – the next 5-10 years? (see list of possible areas for planning and pastoral care by a cluster)

Going Deeper:

- Given the list of objective and subjective criteria a parish might use in discerning cluster partners, which criteria would be most important for our parish to consider and why?