

A New Evangelization for the Church of Maine

An update from the Cluster 23 Planning Committee

In March of 2004, Bishop Richard Malone was installed as the 11th Bishop of the Diocese of Portland. At that time, the question “How can the mission of the Church in Maine continue into the future” was already on his desk.

In June of 2004, Bishop Malone appointed a committee of 18 people from throughout the state to help answer that question. The group was asked to consider the solution not merely from an administrative standpoint, but more importantly, in the context of Evangelization. That is, the goal of our reorganization is to help strengthen the influence of the Gospel on every aspect of our lives.

The strategy: organize the existing 130 or so parishes into 27 groups called clusters; create planning committees for each cluster to meet over a one year period to determine how to capitalize on their strengths; and ask the planning committee to select one administrative model from among four possible designs. A recommendation for the model most appropriate for our cluster, along with a plan for implementation, must be made to the Bishop by June 2006. Implementation of that recommendation, if approved by the Bishop, will occur at some point between 2006 and 2010.

As a starting point, each cluster knows that it will have a single Pastor, with one or more priests (referred to as “vicars” in the evangelization document) assigned for ministry. For Cluster 23, we will have one pastor and two additional priests. The pastor will be assigned by the Bishop. Priests may or may not live in one facility and will travel to the worship sites within the cluster as necessary. The priests will share the masses and sacramental duties at each worship site. Mass schedules will need to be adjusted to accommodate the availability of priests.

The plan is not “one size fits all” and requires much thought and consideration before the final recommendation can be submitted to the Bishop. Members of the Cluster 23 Planning Committee have been meeting since June of 2005 in order to collect information about each individual parish within our cluster. In addition to gathering financial, demographic and other “hard” data, the committee has been meeting with parish leaders to learn more about the values and characteristics that are vital to the long-term life of each parish. Individual meetings were held in November and December with Pastoral Council members and Commission members from St. Joseph’s (Bridgton), St. Elizabeth-Ann Seton (Fryeburg), and Our Lady of Perpetual Help (Windham). In January, meetings were held with St. Anne’s (Gorham) and St. Anthony’s (Westbrook) parish leaders. These meetings provided great insight into the heart of each parish and also identified a common thread of concern and trepidation for what the future will hold. As a member of the planning committee, it was wonderful to see how active each parish community was, and how committed the various volunteers were to their particular programs. Did you know that there is a thrift shop at St. Anthony’s (St. Vincent de Paul) and a wonderful Lazarus Society at St. Joseph’s in Bridgton which helps bereaved families? Again, here exists an opportunity to grow as a faith community by collaborating with our neighboring parishes and enhancing either our own or others’ programs.

The vision for the committee is still evolving as we continue to seek out information from all members of the parish communities. There are still many questions left unanswered. New ways of sharing responsibilities for parish leadership need to be considered in such areas as faith development, social peace and justice, just to name a few. This presents us with an opportunity to create our future as a vibrant community in faith. It is a time for prayer, consultation and working together as we listen and respond to the Holy Spirit.

In an effort to share the planning committee's journey through this process, we are hoping to post minutes of our meetings on each of the various parish websites. In addition, continue to watch for updates in the weekly bulletin or on the bulletin board in each church. We will make a greater effort to share news at the pulpit from this point forward. Though a time has not been identified as yet, the planning committee will be meeting with the parishioners in the coming months to share progress and more detail regarding the model we are considering. Many have requested improved communication, and we will do our best to accomplish that. There are no secrets in this process; if you are concerned about information you've heard and desire clarification, don't hesitate to seek out a member of the committee. Everyone's input and perspective is important!

We are talking about change, and that can be painful. However, the planning committee for Cluster 23 is committed to preserving the values that define and characterize our current parish communities. These are the treasures that will endure and survive any administrative changes that occur in the coming years. The mission of the Church will be supported throughout the plan by bringing larger groups of people together to pool their resources of time, talent, and treasure in a manner that is more effective than any individual parish could accomplish on its own.

For a more detailed look at the reorganization plan and the clusters that will be formed, please visit the Diocesan website at: www.portlanddiocese.net. Or, contact a member of the planning committee:

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