

CONTINUING TO PLAN FOR OUR FUTURE

Implementing the Fourth Plan for Parishes 2020 and Beyond

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WE CONTINUE TO MAKE MUCH PROGRESS

The Diocese of New Ulm continues to implement the *Fourth Plan for Parishes* in union with priests, deacons, religious, parish and diocesan staff, and parishioners throughout the diocese.

In implementing the *Plan* over the last four years, I have been in consultation with the diocesan Committee on Parishes, the Priests' Council, the Priest Personnel Board, and many others. Tom Keaveny, the director of Pastoral Planning, and I, have met with priests, parish leaders and staff, committees and parishioners in every region of the diocese to address the necessity of parish mergers. Since I became bishop, four of our 77 parishes have been closed and four are considered merged with receiving parishes as we continue to address parish population declines and fewer diocesan priests to celebrate weekend Masses.

These and other efforts have enabled increased collaboration of staff and the efficient sharing of parish resources and talents in many of our area faith communities. Some of these area faith communities are beginning new initiatives to reach out to inactive Catholics and to others we want to welcome into our parishes. I am especially grateful for the efforts of the pastors, staff and parishioners who have worked so hard to move forward with these challenging pastoral planning transitions. Through pastoral planning, the merging of parishes is resulting in greater numbers of worshipers at fewer weekend liturgies, a reasonable workload for our priests, and with parishioners actively involved with the New Evangelization.

WE ARE LIVING IN DIFFERENT TIMES

When the diocese was founded in 1957 there were 68,094 Catholics, 98 priests, 86 parishes, seven Catholic high schools, and 37 Catholic grade schools. Sixty-five percent of U.S. Catholics were attending Weekend Masses.

Today the statistics look much different.

1957		2017
285,394	•General Population	280,243
68,094	•Catholic Population	53,329
98	•Active Priests	34
86	•Parishes with Weekend Masses	69
44	•Catholic Schools	17

 Today only 33% of U.S. Catholics attend Weekend Masses compared to 65% in 1957.

Projections show that the number of active priests serving in the diocese, age 70 and under, will decline in the next five years to a total as low as 27. In addition, due to deaths and smaller Catholic families, the diocese is losing over 1,000 parishioners per year. About 33 percent of registered Catholics in our parishes attend Mass on the weekends and the decrease in active parishioners usually means a decrease in financial support for parish facilities, as well as fewer people to plan and work at parish activities.

Prayer - Planning - Possibilities
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For a copy of the *Diocesan Plan for Parishes: From 2013 to 2020 and Beyond* visit www.dnu.org/fourthplan/ or call 507-233-5339.

Prayer - Planning - Possibilities

THE NECESSITY OF PARISH MERGERS

Clearly, it is not feasible to continue operating with as many small parishes as we have in the past. The merging of our parishes and support for efforts to strengthen our area faith communities is a priority as we plan for our future.

It is significant to note that with just 17 fewer parishes with weekend Masses since the inception of the diocese, the number of priests has declined by 64, which means increased expectations for our priests. I observe the effects of this stress on our priests. With weekend schedules that include weddings, funerals and three or more weekend Masses at multiple locations, we need to continue to merge our smaller parishes. Many of our weekend Masses have fewer than 100 participants and our smaller parishes have very few children, signaling major declines in parish populations. Many weekday Masses in our diocese have fewer than 15 participants.

Merging some of our small parishes is a necessity. In a merger, the assets of the merged parish – such as its church building, its cemetery (if it has one), and other financial resources – become the responsibility of the receiving parish. Parishioners are engaged in the receiving parish and they join where their families attend school or participate in other area faith community liturgies and activities. It is NOT true that the church building of a merged parish automatically shuts down once a merger takes place. Baptisms, funerals, weddings, special weekend Masses, and other forms of divine worship still occur. Weekday Masses are celebrated depending on the availability of our priests.

THE OVERALL GOAL

The goal of the Fourth Plan for Parishes and our pastoral planning is to look honestly and prayerfully at the situation in the Diocese of New Ulm. Parish mergers are only part of the Plan. Parishioners are being asked to invite back home those who have left the church and to welcome those who are new to our communities. More parishes are working together with strategies for a New Evangelization as they plan for the future.

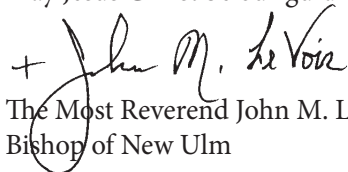
As I visit parishes, I see a new vibrancy already evident in area faith communities where weekend Mass schedules have been adjusted in light of attendance declines. Due to fewer Masses, the number of people at each Mass has increased. The sense of community is stronger. The worshipping communities are more robust. The Mass participation and singing is more vigorous. Priests are less stressed. I believe these changes are positive. With prayer and proper planning, there can be stronger parishes and area faith communities, even though there is real pain and sadness involved as we leave some of the past behind, especially in our smaller merged parishes.

A PRAYERFUL AND COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

A significant part of the *Plan* is to encourage young men to consider the priesthood and to pray that more young men answer God's call to be priests. Currently, the diocese has nine men in the seminary. Most still have many years of formation ahead. Please pray for their continued priestly formation and that more men will answer God's call.

As the bishop of the diocese, I need help as we continue to make decisions about pastoral planning. I value the input from everyone in the diocese: priests, deacons, parish and diocesan staff, parishioners, and so many who volunteer on committees and in their parishes. Please share your ideas with your pastor, pastoral planning staff, and parish leadership. Be supportive of their efforts to address these issues. All of us are members of the diocese and all of us are called to work together. Prayer and honest dialogue will help me to discern what God's will is for us as a diocese. Please continue to support pastoral planning efforts to create realistic weekend Mass schedules, consolidate parish operations, and merge parishes when necessary. Through pastoral planning, we are not losing our history. Rather we are changing our structures and the way that we celebrate our faith based on an honest and prayerful look at what is happening in our parishes and in our diocese.

May Jesus Christ be our guiding light.

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The Most Reverend John M. LeVoir
Bishop of New Ulm