



Parishes across the Diocese of Peoria will plan for the future in concert with neighboring parishes under a new initiative called "Growing in Faith Together."

Featured Article

Yearlong initiative calls parishes to collaborate, plan future

Bishop Daniel R. Jenky, CSC, has called all parishes and missions in the Diocese of Peoria to begin a yearlong process of planning for the future.

The major new initiative -- called "Growing in Faith Together," or GIFT -- asks parishes to form "clusters" with neighboring parishes and suggest ways to work together to better serve the people of God.

"This process is about how we can be the Catholic church in central Illinois in the coming decades," said Bishop Jenky in introducing GIFT to priests from throughout the diocese who met in Peoria on June 23. "Fundamentally, it's how we continue to grow and reorganize ourselves to do what we already do in parishes, but do it better."

In the coming weeks, each parish in the diocese will establish a "core team" -- comprised of the pastor and four parish leaders -- to coordinate the local process and represent the parish in conversations with neighboring faith communities in their "cluster."

Eight regional training sessions have been planned for Sept. 13-14 to familiarize the parish core teams with the goals, timeline and steps involved in "Growing in Faith Together." (See related materials at [Catholic Diocese of Peoria](#).)

THRIVING IN MIDST OF CHANGE

"I have a lot of confidence in what we are about to do," said Bishop Jenky. He explained that, in recent years, challenges such as demographic shifts, the diminishing number of priests, and the financial situation of parishes have been addressed incrementally and locally. But advisers have convinced him the time is right to confront the issues across the entire diocese in an open, collaborative way.

Msgr. Paul Showalter, P.A., vicar general, has been named Diocesan Project Coordinator. He was among a team of diocesan leaders who studied how other dioceses are responding to similar challenges.

"We're not approaching this process as though we have a list with decisions already made," said Msgr. Showalter, who is familiar with many issues involved through 30 years of service on the diocese's parishes and institutions committee. "What we want to do is work with parishes in cooperation with neighboring parishes to assess their strengths, concerns and explore how they can work together."

To guide parishes through the ambitious phases of "Growing in Faith Together," the diocese has contracted with The Reid Group, a Seattle-based consulting firm that recently assisted the Archdiocese of Newark and the Diocese of Scranton, among others, in similar processes. Two members of the group -- John Reid and Maureen Gallagher -- were in Peoria on June 23 to introduce GIFT to priests as well as diocesan staff.

“This is about building more vibrant parishes,” said Reid in naming the first of 10 goals of “Growing in Faith Together.” Our concern is that all of you thrive in the midst of change, not merely survive.”

Also among the 10 stated goals are strengthening the presence and ministry of the church in the city and rural areas of the diocese; fostering an appreciation for and participation in Sunday Eucharist and the Sacrament of Penance, and making stewardship a way of life throughout the diocese.

PARISH MODELS FOR THE FUTURE

To those ends and more, all parishes and missions in the diocese will be asked to look at their own strengths and concerns individually and in relation to the “cluster” of selected neighboring faith communities. Over the course of the next year, every parish in the diocese will propose a future model of parish life from the following four options:

-- Merged or consolidated parishes, resulting in a new parish configuration able to provide more activities and opportunities that the original parishes could have managed on their own;

-- Linked parishes, in which two or more parishes remain distinct canonical entities but share a pastor and do many things cooperatively;

-- Partnership parishes, in which joint programs are created and, when appropriate, staff is shared to enhance ministry and practice good stewardship of resources, and

-- “In Solidum Team,” involving three or more parishes being served by a team of priests, supported by deacons, women religious and lay ministers.

Msgr. Showalter said parish core committees will receive a list of criteria to help them determine the viability of their parish.

Bishop Jenky will soon appoint a Diocesan Planning Commission -- a geographically representative group of about 25 ordained, religious, and lay leaders -- to study the parish/cluster recommendations. The commission will offer its own “best thinking” in return and then, after another conversation with local regions next spring, make final recommendations to Bishop Jenky by June 22, 2012.

The bishop will then take two months to consult with advisers before making decisions, which are to be implemented by January 2013.

EMBRACING THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

All involved in planning “Growing in Faith Together” acknowledged that, as with any time of transition, there may be resistance to change and feelings of anger, sadness, and loss. But Reid said the firm’s experiences in other dioceses show it is also a “marvelous opportunity for new life,” and called on Catholics of the diocese to believe in and act on the Paschal Mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection.

“People love their parishes -- thank God!” said Reid. “Some are going to ask ‘Why are we doing this? I like the way things are.’ They have a right to those feelings.” But by giving all a voice in the process, keeping communication open, staying rooted in prayer, and always keeping in mind the goals of “Growing in Faith Together,” the next year “can be a wonderful gift” to the diocese, he said.

“This is hard work,” said Reid. “It’s work that will evoke tears. But the promise of new life is there.”

Msgr. Showalter, who will be assisted in project leadership by Dr. Vincent McClean, director of the Office of Catechetics, agreed.

“I feel that coming out of this we’ll have a better understanding of our need to evangelize and work and pray together,” he said.

Bishop Jenky recalled that pioneers of our diocese “faced extraordinary challenges, but were on fire with faith.” He advised Catholics of the diocese to embrace the words of Blessed Pope John Paul II: “Be not afraid.”

If Catholics of the diocese remain united with Christ and one another, Bishop Jenky said, “there is nothing we can’t face, nothing we can’t do.”