

Planning for the Church in the 21st Century

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“Unless the Lord Build the house,
they labor in vain who build it.
Unless the Lord guard the city,
in vain does the guard keep vigil.”*

Psalm 127:1

Planning is not new in the Church. Without plans, the Diocese of Brooklyn would have never been established in 1853 in response to the flood of German and Irish immigrants coming to Long Island. The diocese would not have expanded in size and service to include the vast network of parishes, schools, hospitals, and orphanages. It would not have established new parishes and schools for new immigrant groups entering the Diocese. The Diocese of Rockville Centre would not have been established in 1957, after many older immigrants began to move out of Brooklyn and Queens to Nassau and Suffolk counties. Without the careful, prayerful, plans of generations of Bishops and Pastors, and the generosity of parishioners the Diocese of Brooklyn would not have the 216 parishes, staffed by over 360 priests and 1,300 religious sisters and brothers, that are the spiritual home to approximately 1.8 million Catholics. At every stage in the history of any diocese, the people of God are challenged to understand how the Lord is calling them to grow and change so that they can better proclaim the mystery of His love.

What is new is the *way* that we plan. Two important developments in the life of the Church in the U.S. over the last 30 years have come to affect *who is involved* in forming the pastoral plan and *the information that is available* to the planners.

The People of God: Responding to Our Baptismal Call

In the 1960's, the Second Vatican Council recognized that the talents of the laity makes them major contributors to the welfare of the entire Church. The laity as sharers in the role of Christ, have an active part to play in the life and activity of the Church. “Their activity is so necessary within church communities that without it the apostolate of the pastors is often unable to achieve its full effectiveness.” (AA,10)

The Council also emphasized that Bishops and Pastors are to oversee this collaboration. The word they used to describe the continuity, directness, and mutuality of this activity is "dialogue." "A great many benefits are to be hoped for from this familiar dialogue between the laity and their pastors: in the laity, a strengthened sense of personal responsibility, a renewed enthusiasm, a more ready application of their talents to the projects of their pastors. The latter, for their part, aided by the experience of the laity, can more clearly and more suitably come to decisions regarding spiritual and temporal matters." (LG,37)

The nature of this dialogue is also that it avoids narrow parochialism, always reaching beyond the individual parish for the sake of the common good. As they work together, "They (the laity and priests) should constantly foster an ... appreciation of their own diocese, of which the parish

is a kind of cell, and ever ready, at their bishop's invitation, to participate in diocesan projects. Indeed, to fulfill the needs of cities and rural areas, they should not limit their cooperation to the parochial ... boundaries but strive to extend it to interparochial ... This is constantly becoming all the more necessary because the daily increase in mobility of populations, reciprocal relationships, and means of communication no longer allow any sector of society to remain closed in upon itself." (AA,10)

These statements have been reinforced by Pope John Paul II at the close of the 2000 Jubilee Year in his Apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. He writes, " Communion must be cultivated and extended day by day and at every level in the structures of each Church's life ... The theology and spirituality of communion encourage a fruitful dialogue between Pastors and faithful: on the one hand uniting them a priori in all that is essential, and on the other leading them to pondered agreement in matters open to discussion."

While emphasizing the legitimate authority of the Pastors, the Pope encourages Pastors to listen more widely to the entire People of God. He calls attention to Saint Benedict's reminder to the Abbot of a monastery, inviting him to consult even the youngest members of the community: "By the Lord's inspiration, it is often a younger person who knows what is best". And Saint Paulinus of Nola urges: "Let us listen to what all the faithful say, because in every one of them the Spirit of God breathes". (NMI, 45)

In keeping with these teachings, parish clusters need to include representatives of all the people who will be affected by the plan. These people (usually members of **parish councils**) need;

- To have a **clear vision of the purpose** for the plan,
- To recognize that they are **called to do God's work** not press their own agenda,
- To include laity and clergy who are prepared to **look beyond their own parish** and recognize planning for their Church as their work,
- To **share an appreciation of each of the parishes** involved, their strengths and limitations and the challenges and opportunities that exist in the communities they serve and,
- To **promote a prayerful process** that encourages the **full participation of all the faithful** in identifying the direction for the future based on solid information.

The role of the planners is consultative rather than deliberative, yet this does not mean that they are less meaningful and relevant. These groups recommend to the Bishop a responsible and *informed direction* to bring about the ongoing renewal of the parishes of the cluster. Pastoral planning is an opportunity for everyone to discuss how to use the vast talent and energy of all the baptized in the parishes of a cluster to do the work of the Church.

Pastors, staff, parish lay leaders, and all parishioners need to be prepared for changes. In the spirit of ongoing conversion, some change will always result from such a planning activity. In some instances, given the realities in a particular cluster, a parish may need to be founded there, or altered, or even closed. The same could be said of schools, programs, and other parish organizations as the situation warrants. For example, in some parts of the diocese, the mission of the Church may be accomplished more effectively as resources are strengthened through

consolidation; in other areas, the mission of the Church may call for the establishment of a new parish or another appropriate structure. In other cases, on the parish level, it may seem best that programs and parish organizations be initiated, dropped or altered. In every case, the principal objective of the activity of cluster pastoral planning is **renewal of parishes** that is, finding the ways and means for carrying out the mission of the Church *in the most effective manner possible*.

Informed Direction: Information in Service to the Mission of the Church

The other thing that has changed in the last few years is the data that can be made available to the pastoral planners. New information technologies have enabled every organization, including the Church, to collect, assemble, manage and make sense of large aggregations of **data**. But having this capability is not sufficient. The **data** needs to be turned into **information** that is understandable and useful to planners. The **information** needs to be turned into **knowledge**, shared by the planners, about what is happening in the parish communities. Through the help of the Spirit, the **knowledge** needs to be turned into **wisdom** to be offered as a recommendation to the Bishop for his consideration. Finally, with the acceptance of the plan by the Bishop, the **wisdom** needs to be turned into **wise and considered action** to be carried out by the Pastors and the people of the parishes that are involved.

Accurate and timely information needs to be provided to the cluster planners in order for them to make good recommendations. The most important piece of information is a shared sense of the mission of the parish and their shared experience of how well the parish is able to carry out the mission. Other information that is typically helpful includes the changes over time in the size of the Catholic population, sacramental activity, participation in worship, participation in the school and other parish religious instruction. Other important information includes projections of the availability of clergy and religious staff, financial resources, conditions of the buildings and other facilities, and the cost of anticipated maintenance. Parishioners' expectations of the parish and perceptions of the community are other pieces of information that parish planners find helpful.

A **formal planning process** is needed to engage all the parishioners to consider the information, to understand what the parish needs to do, and to assume their role in it. Knowledge about how groups work most effectively together, such as the use of **facilitated discussion**, and **methods of decision making**, such as the use of consensus, needs to be placed in the service of the planning groups to help them communicate among themselves. **Mass communication technologies**, including surveys and the use of electronic media, need to be placed in the service of the planning groups to assist them in consulting with every parishioner and in keeping all in the parish community informed.

Each generation is called to be good stewards of all that God has given us. In our time and with God's help, we are called to develop the information and participate in the planning processes necessary to recommend those actions that will continue to strengthen the Church for the 21st century.