

Faith in Our Future Update, August 2016

As Fr. Mike has written in his Pastor's Notes over the last few weeks, the Diocesan Planning Commission released its preliminary recommendations for all 25 "parish cohorts" of the diocese as the next step in the "Faith in our Future" process. As he noted, although our cohort team, #8, recommended we continue as "**linked**" parishes (1 pastor, 3 distinct parishes, sharing services and ministries as appropriate), the Commission's preliminary recommendation was that the 3 parishes **merge** "at the St. James site".

In the interest of full disclosure, their complete recommendation is below, along with the cohort's intended response. **Please carefully read both the recommendations and our intended response!** Please note that the Diocese emphasizes the "preliminary" nature of the Commission's recommendation, and that it is subject to revision as the cohort replies to its concerns in a detailed way.

Diocesan Planning Commission Preliminary Recommendations

COUNTY: MERCER

COHORT: 8

PARISHES: Saint James, Saint Alphonsus, Saint George

OTHER INSTITUTIONS

Capital Health Medical Center

Appreciation

We wish to thank you for the prayer, reflection and work which you have put into ***Faith in Our Future*** to date. We appreciate the time and effort you have given to evaluating your parishes and your cohort based on the goals and criteria established by Bishop O'Connell and for making Cohort Suggestions for your future.

Commendations

We commend you for your:

- Spirit of cooperation among the three parishes and your openness to explore all the ways to make the parishes better.
- Realization of the need to increase effective evangelization of both the active and inactive Catholics in the Hopewell Valley Region.
- Desire to share resources, facilities and best practices for the good of all.
- Plan to decrease the number of Masses to make the liturgies more active and less taxing on the priests.

Preliminary Recommendations

We acknowledge your desire to implement a Linked Parishes model and understand that your rationale is based on the following factors:

- The current model (unofficially “linked”) is working well and is in the beginning stages. With time it will lead to more success.
- You are already beginning to share resources (e.g. Music Director) and envision more of such sharing (CRASH)
- Formalizing the relationship among the parishes “will develop ways of managing and growing your combined parish community in ways that don’t depend upon any one particular priest.”

However, based on our study of your parish and cohort evaluation reports, the challenges you identified on your Parish Summary Report Form, Bishop O’Connell’s goals for ***Faith in Our Future*** and the needs of the diocese as a whole, we respectfully make the following preliminary recommendations:

- **Model Three: Merged Parishes** among St. Alphonsus, St. George and St. James at the St. James site, no later than July 2018, pending a structural review and maintenance appraisal.
- In order to determine whether or not there should be an additional worship site, we recommend you institute a study of:
 1. The age of facilities and the upkeep required
 2. Number of people served
 3. Likelihood of successful evangelization in each specific parish region, especially given the proximity of other non-diocesan Catholic churches
 4. Financial stability
 5. Usable space

We further recommend that you:

- Develop a prioritized and detailed plan on the implementation of the improvements in Sacramental Life, Evangelization, Stewardship and Communal life as you described in your suggestion, including the following:
 1. Outreach to inactive Catholics and young adults
 2. More effective use of web and social media
 3. Active engagement of new parish members
 4. Adult faith formation programs
 5. Continued integration of ministries among the churches

Rationale: We make these preliminary recommendations based on your own study and data and the following:

1. Limited growth due to preserved lands
2. Steady or declining Sunday Mass attendees
3. Limited number of priests
4. Aging of facilities with inadequate common space in two of the parishes
5. Limited financial resources.

6. The opportunities for improvements in the Sacramental Life, Evangelization and Communal life.
7. We believe our preliminary recommendations for models and ministries will help Cohort 8 achieve the 5 goals approved by Bishop O'Connell for *Faith in Our Future*.

Please Respectfully Note:

These preliminary recommendations are based on the information we could garner from the materials you provided us. Some of the things that we could use more clarification about are the following:

1. In the final Cohort report you mention “Due to deferred maintenance, a detailed financial plan involving all three parishes was necessary and is now in place.” The plan, however, was not included in your report to the Diocesan Planning Commission.
2. As noted in the Parish Data Verification form, St Alphonsus has recorded “investment income” of some \$135,000 in 2013 and \$206,000 in 2014 and “0” in 2015 on an investment portfolio of \$1.3 million at fiscal year-end 2014 and seemingly about \$1.1 million at fiscal year-end 2015. Details on the nature of the “investment income” as well as the nature of the investments would be most useful. It appears, without those “investment income” gains, the church would have been operating at a deficit for 3 years in a row.

Cohort #8's Intended Response to the Preliminary Recommendations

The cohort team will vigorously defend its “Linked Parishes” recommendation and argue against the “Merged Parish” model. We see the Commission’s recommendation based largely on financial reasoning that does not make use of the most detailed and up-to-date financial, maintenance, and demographic information. We will further argue that, counter to their position, there is much “internal evangelization” already taking place in all three parishes that is already beginning to bear fruit, especially in the St. George community. Finally, we will argue that this revitalization will be threatened if not derailed by merging the parishes into St. James, resulting in a material loss of parishioners who live a great distance from St. James, negatively impacting our financial planning.

We ask for your continued prayers as we continue our work to ensure the best possible outcome for the entire Catholic Community of Hopewell Valley.

Respectfully,

Faith in our Future Cohort #8 Core Team

Paul Kimaid, cohort leader

Sue Hansen, St. Alphonsus leader

Deacon Mike Riley, St. George leader

Deacon Dick Currie, St. James leader