

Guidelines for Clustered Parishes in Diocese of Norwich

Introduction

When parishes in the Diocese of Norwich are clustered, it means that a group of parishes, each having its own pastor/administrator, works together to combine programs and ministries, with the goal of having the parishes function as one community, with as little duplication of programs and ministries as possible. Clustering is usually the first step toward yoking the parishes under the leadership of one pastor.

The time the parishes spend together as a cluster, while each parish has its own pastor, is a time of transition. Each member of each parish community must be made aware of the possibility that one or more parishes in the cluster may eventually be under the leadership of one pastor; that is, be yoked. In the time of transition, a balance must be maintained between bringing the parishes together into one community and allowing the parishes to maintain their distinct identities.

The following guidelines are intended to assist with the process of transition for the parishes of the cluster. It must be kept in mind that the process of transition is gradual, for clergy, religious and laity alike. Patience, prayer and good will are essential as the process moves forward.

I. The Role of the Pastors

The success of the transition process is almost completely dependent on the degree of cooperation established between the pastors of the individual parishes. If the pastors truly work together for the good of their parishes, the parishioners will be more likely to respond positively as various changes are made. The Pastors are the mediators between the two or more parish communities in the cluster, each with its own identity, values, history, and worship style, all of which must be brought into a new sense of unity and cooperation.

Each pastor in the cluster must make it a priority to communicate with his parish about the clustering process, and about the probable step to yoking.

II. Parish Pastoral Councils

According to Diocesan Policies, Parish Pastoral Councils are mandated for every parish. The Parish Pastoral Council is an advisory group, whose purpose is to assist the pastor in his leadership of the parish community.

Each pastor must give special attention to the Parish Pastoral Council in his parish and communicate with them concerning the clustering process. Only when the Parish Pastoral Council is well informed can its advisory function be properly fulfilled.

III. Cluster Committee

The first issue to be addressed by the pastors and the Parish Pastoral Councils should be that of the Cluster Committee. This committee is composed of the pastors of each parish and at least three representatives from each parish in the cluster.

The tasks of this Committee are two: first, to guide the clustering process, set goals, establish time-lines and determine when and how various initiatives will be undertaken; second, to coordinate communication with parishioners in the individual parishes to ensure that they are always aware of the ongoing process.

There are several options for determining membership on this Cluster Committee. The pastors of the cluster parishes have the responsibility to set the selection process in motion and then to call the initial Committee meeting. At the initial meeting the Committee will designate the responsibilities of chairing, taking minutes, and name a contact person who will send minutes of each meeting to the committee members and to Pastoral Planning Office.

The formation of the Cluster Committee provides an opportunity for broad involvement in parish life for laity. Committee members must have a positive and accurate understanding of the cluster process, and its importance in assuring the future of our parishes.

Possibilities for membership include:

1. Continuation of service from those who were on the Cluster Committee during the deanery Pastoral Planning meetings
2. Volunteers from the parish at large
3. Volunteers from the Parish Pastoral Councils and/or Finance Councils
4. Officers of the Parish Pastoral Councils and/or Finance Councils
5. Appointment by the pastor

One of the first tasks to be addressed by the Cluster Committee must be how it will cooperate and communicate with the Parish Pastoral Councils and the Finance Councils of the individual parishes of the cluster.

IV. Developing a Sense of Community

The goal of the clustering process is the development of a sense of community and cooperation between the parishes of the cluster. This is accomplished over a period of time through prayer, communication and shared activities and programs. Pastors, Parish Pastoral Councils and Cluster Committees must work together to determine how and when various activities are to be combined.

1. Collaboration in Parish Programs and Activities

The goal of collaboration is for the parishes of a cluster to share their resources with one another, thereby enriching one another. Collaboration within the cluster will also ease the transition to the parishes being under the leadership of one pastor. According to the directives of Bishop Cote, the following list will serve as a starting point for collaboration efforts:

- Seasonal prayer services and celebrations
- Devotional programs and social events
- Purchasing parish and office supplies
- Faith Formation for children and adults, including sacramental preparation
- Coordination of hospital and nursing home calls
- Coordination of Mass schedules

The parishes of a cluster may also consider collaborating on several other activities or ministries, such as the following:

Youth ministry	RCIA/Evangelization
Parish missions and retreats	Liturgy Committees and Music
Bereavement ministry	Social Justice outreach
Haitian ministries	Various Parish organizations
Respect Life Committee	

2. Parish Schools

Because Catholic Education should be the concern of all parishes, if one of the parishes in the cluster has a parish school, all parishes should help to foster the growth of the parish school and to become involved in its activities.

3. Cluster Names

Very often, clustered parishes find it beneficial to adopt a name and/or a logo which provides identity as a group. The Office for Pastoral Planning keeps a list of those names which have already been chosen by clusters and approved by the Bishop. This list is available upon request. Cluster names are approved by the diocesan bishop before they are used. In any logo or heading for the cluster, the names of the individual parishes of the cluster must also appear.

4. Coordination of Mass Schedules

On the practical level, the coordination of Mass schedules is one of the major difficulties encountered in fostering collaboration within a cluster. The topic must be approached with sensitivity, and discussions must focus on the importance of the Eucharistic celebration for priests and people alike, and not on convenience or long-standing personal customs. Especially in consideration of the weekend Mass schedule, parishioners should be involved in the decision-making process, either through a survey, presentation of options or some other method through which their preferences can be expressed.

Pastors of the parishes within the cluster might begin this process with coordination of weekday and Holy Day Mass schedules, and then, over a period of time, begin to coordinate weekend schedules.

The coordination of Mass schedules is to be guided by two basic principles:

First, the people must be made aware that no priest is permitted to celebrate more than three Masses on any given Sunday, or four in the weekend. (This does not include weddings and funerals.) In fact, priests must receive permission from the diocesan bishop if the limit of three Sunday Masses or four on a weekend is exceeded (see Canon 905). Even though an individual priest might be willing to do more on a given weekend, this cannot be expected or required on a regular basis.

Second, in scheduling Masses, consideration must be given to the best use of the seating capacity of the parish church. This is made clear in the liturgical instruction *Eucharisticum mysterium*, issued by the Vatican in 1967.

The Apostolic See discourages the multiplication of Masses when a church is large enough to accommodate the faithful at a smaller number of Masses. Multiple Masses attended by a few, and small group Masses on the Lord's Day tend to detract from the value of the Eucharist as a sign and source of ecclesial unity.

The weekend Mass schedule for any given cluster must be coordinated according to these principles, even though the number of priests currently assigned to the parishes of the cluster might not make the adjustments immediately necessary.

Ideally, at the end of this process, the weekend Mass schedule for the cluster of parishes is coordinated in such a way that the Masses can be covered by one priest for a two-parish cluster, or two priests for a three-parish cluster, etc.

Communion Services

In keeping with Diocesan Policies, communion services are not allowed in place of weekday Mass. When weekday Mass is not available in a particular parish, the people are directed to other parishes in the cluster where weekday Mass is celebrated.

If weekday Mass is not available in a given parish, as an alternative to directing parishioners to a neighboring parish, the use of other prayer forms can be encouraged: praying the psalms, Liturgy of the Hours, Liturgy of the Word, etc.

The geography and circumstances of the Diocese neither require nor permit the use of the ritual “Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest.”

5. Communication

Parish Bulletin: The parishes of a cluster are encouraged to use one bulletin for all the parishes, if this is feasible. A common bulletin would have a common cover, list all contact information for each of the parishes of the cluster, as well as Mass times for each parish. A shared bulletin would also provide the usual information from each parish, some space for notices about shared activities, and space for diocesan information.

Parish Web sites: The parishes of a cluster are encouraged to consider the advantages of establishing a common website which can be used by all the parishes of the cluster. If the parishes prefer to maintain separate websites, each website should provide a link to the other parishes of the cluster.

V. Finances

Each parish of the cluster maintains its own financial records, its own Finance Council and its own accounts, all according to Diocesan Policy in these matters. Any questions about finances for a cluster should be directed to the Diocesan Finance Office.

Pastors of each parish in the cluster must emphasize to parishioners the importance registering and using weekly collection envelopes, so that the finances of the individual parishes can be accurately recorded. This is especially important for the Christmas and Easter collections. As is the usual practice in the Diocese, donations not specified for a particular parish remain with the parish in which the donation was made.

Other Assistance

Resources concerning collaborative ministry and the pastoring of multiple parishes are available from the Continuing Education of the Clergy Commission or from the Office of Pastoral Planning.

Job descriptions and other resources are also available to the pastors of clustered parishes if they wish to consider the employment of a business manager for the parishes of the cluster.

Pastors of clustered parishes are encouraged to contact the Office of Pastoral Planning for assistance in organizing information meetings or days of retreat/reflection to assist parishioners in making the transition from individual parishes to clustered parishes.

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