

Editorial - All should participate in pastoral planning

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To no one's surprise, the reaction to the latest round of parish mergers and closings announced by Springfield Bishop Timothy A. McDonnell last week included sadness and reflection on what is being lost from the heritage of the affected parishes.

In parts of Berkshire, Franklin and Hampden counties, local Catholics are mourning the loss of venerable buildings that have been spiritual homes for generations of Catholics. Even in places where parishioners have long seen the need to consolidate facilities there will certainly be more than a few tears as closing liturgies are celebrated in the coming months.

But it is surprising that, at least in some parts of the diocese, the need for a hard, honest look at the state of the diocese's parish configuration still seems to be shocking. Bloggers and others with their own agendas certainly have played a role in the media's reporting of this week's events.

Headlines like "Insults from the Springfield throne," "Growing up mostly Catholic"; "Shades of the moneylenders"; "Parishes targeted for closing"; "A plot by the diocese" and "Battling the all-powerful" are generated by editors who sometimes have gone beyond the actual substance of their associated letters to the editor or editorials for a catchy phrase.

Even more troubling is an apparently widespread belief among many local Catholics that pastoral planning will never affect them.

But the days of the Diocese of Springfield operating 150 church buildings are gone forever. At best, our parishes can now afford to support about 80 active diocesan priests, since many parishes can no longer afford to pay the salary and benefits of even one full-time priest. Even if priestly vocations were plentiful, we would still be closing parishes.

Catholics in the five regions of the diocese still in the pastoral planning process need to reflect on these realities. Delegates who attended their region's listening sessions need to immediately start parish-level dialogues about what is likely to happen in the parishes near them.

And those who have yet to attend a listening session need to understand that they are a vital part of the pastoral planning process.

There will undoubtedly be another round of even bigger headlines when church closures are announced in Springfield, Holyoke, Chicopee and Northampton. Public attention may be drawn to talk of sit-ins and canonical appeals to Rome.

But the central questions remain: What kind of diocesan configuration do we need to effectively minister in the 21st century? Can we afford to have a diocese where a disproportionate percentage of our limited financial and human capital is spent on maintaining venerable but redundant "memory boxes" of faith?

As Bishop McDonnell recently said, "We've been putting money into buildings, rather than into people."

All members of the diocese - clergy, religious and laity - need to face reality, and help their fellow Catholics to become fully involved in the pastoral planning process.

And once the process is complete, they will need to come together for its difficult, but necessary, implementation.