

On Mission for The Church Alive! update

***On Mission for The Church Alive!* to enter new phase**

By Bob De Witt

Three years after it began with Bishop David Zubik's call to prayer, the ***On Mission for The Church Alive!*** planning initiative will move into a **new phase** next spring, bringing changes that will affect **St. Athanasius Parish** and every faith community in the Diocese of Pittsburgh in an effort to revitalize the Church.

It's important to understand the **significant trends** taking place in all six counties of the diocese. Since 2000, our **Catholic population** has fallen from 753,147 to 632,138. **Weekly Mass attendance** has declined from nearly 247,000 to less than 139,000. Participation in the **sacraments**, including Holy Matrimony, Infant Baptisms and First Holy Communion, is down 40-50 percent.

K-8 enrollment in area Catholic schools has dropped from more than 23,000 students 17 years ago to fewer than 11,000 today. Half of our parishes are running **operating deficits**. And the number of **diocesan priests** in active ministry has decreased from 338 men to 210, with a projection of just 112 priests available within eight years.

The *On Mission* initiative is designed to invest more resources in **mission** instead of **maintenance**, to better share the Good News, and bring more people to Jesus through vibrant, sustainable parishes and effective ministries.

On Sept. 7, after studying extensive data and feedback from parishioners, the **On Mission Commission** recommended to Bishop Zubik that the diocese's current **188 parishes** be placed in 48 groupings, which eventually would come together to form **48 new parishes** comprised mostly of **two to three churches each**. These groupings are not finalized.

St. Athanasius is currently in a recommended grouping of four parishes that include **St. Teresa of Avila, St. Sebastian** and **Incarnation of the Lord**. The final number of future sites in our grouping is **not yet final**.

As this **consultation phase** draws to a close, Bishop Zubik is receiving input from priests, deacons and his leadership groups regarding the proposed groupings of parishes, guided by 21 criteria covering mission territory, care for God's people, financial viability and effective ministry.

The next step will be a **transition phase** beginning in April 2018. Bishop Zubik will announce the final groupings of parishes, the number of Masses per grouping, assignments of priests and deacons, and blueprints to assist administrators in the work ahead.

In the fall of 2018, the **implementation phase** of *On Mission* will get underway. New clergy assignments will begin—not only in parishes, but in hospitals, nursing homes, high schools, colleges, and correctional institutions, which are served by chaplains.

No parishes will merge and no church buildings will close at that time. However, **new Mass schedules** will begin, both to bring more parishioners together in churches that now are half-full, as well as to follow canon law that allows each priest to celebrate Mass a maximum of three times on a Sunday or holy day.

The administrators of the new groupings of parishes will consider staffing needs, a process for combining pastoral and finance councils, development of common ministry programs and timelines for merging parishes **between 2019 and 2023.**

St. Athanasius' dedicated **On Mission Team** of Regina Boerio, Laura Halas, Lou Locante, Jim Roos, Chris Shipley and Ruth Snyder, along with our pastor, Father Bob Norton, and Deacon Bill Palamara, have joined nearly 1,000 other volunteers in every parish to host consultation sessions and communicate key information.

As we await Bishop Zubik's announcement next April, he urges us to **continue to pray**—for him, for the guidance of the Spirit, and to be open to where God will lead us.

To **read more**, including the listing of all 48 groupings of parishes, visit OnMissionChurchAlive.org.

De Witt, a St. Athanasius parishioner, serves as communications director for On Mission for The Church Alive! in the Diocese of Pittsburgh.