



Transforming Challenges Into Opportunities

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## **Client Story: Parish Reorganization in a Catholic Diocese**

### **The Situation**

A large Catholic diocese, with both urban and rural regions and a strong history of both geographic and ethnic parishes, found itself living with decisions about parish life that were made in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Like most other dioceses, significant shifts in the Catholic population meant that the current demographic is much different than it was a generation or two ago.

The financial burden of maintaining the current configuration of parishes was no longer sustainable, but how to address the situation creatively and responsibly was not clear. The diocese approached The Reid Group for help in developing and implementing a plan to move forward.

### **The Challenges**

The diocese faced several challenges in its parish configuration:

- The declining overall population resulted in churches that were only 1/3 or less full for weekly liturgies.
- There was difficulty in finding a sufficient number of parishioners to serve in leadership roles on parish councils and other committees, and as catechists.
- Parish debt was mounting as a result of insufficient resources to fund staffing and ministry.
- There was a diminishing number of priests overall—and fewer of the current priests were willing to serve as a pastor.
- In the past, ethnic groups built their own churches. As people moved away from their traditional neighborhoods, they become involved in geographic or territorial parishes. As a result, there are far too many church buildings for the Catholic population in the diocese in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The Reid Group Solution**

As tempting as it is for a bishop simply to announce strategic decisions about a new configuration of parishes, it has been shown again and again that it is important to resist that temptation and to embrace a “top-down and a bottom-up” approach.

The Reid Group offered just such an approach, tested in numerous dioceses, that involved eight steps:

**Step One: Evaluation of parish viability.** The first conversations at the diocesan level resulted in the appointment of a Planning Commission to oversee the process, clarified the assumptions and goals of a parish re-organization process, identified possible parish ministry models, developed criteria for a viable parish and proposed a specific approach for engaging the leadership in every parish in the diocese.

The conversation then moved to the parish level where a core leadership group evaluated the parish in light of the criteria for viability—the evaluation involved naming strengths, identifying challenges and reviewing financial and sacramental realities.

Once all the parish self-evaluations were completed, the parishes joined in clusters (three-six parishes) of their own choosing to share what they had learned from their parish evaluations and to complete a cluster-wide evaluation of viability.

**Step Two: Choose a ministry model.** Having completed parish and cluster evaluations, each cluster was asked to choose a future ministry model from one of the approved models (merger, linkage, partnership, parish life coordinator, ministry team) and to offer a rationale for why their choice offered the most vital future.

**Step Three: Planning Commission preliminary recommendations.** The Reid Group facilitated a multi-day retreat of The Planning Commission (20 members, women and men, ordained and lay) where the Commission reviewed the cluster proposals and, in light of the goals and criteria established by the bishop, made preliminary recommendations that went back to each cluster. This “best thinking” of the Commission was not the final word but rather took the form of preliminary recommendations with rationale in order to encourage further conversation at the parish and cluster levels.

**Step Four: Cluster review of preliminary recommendations.** The cluster leadership teams then had a second opportunity to consider their future by reviewing the Planning Commission material and talk about the areas of agreement and disagreement between the cluster and the Commission. As with the earlier process, clusters were asked to offer their best thinking about what would strengthen the Church in their area. The Reid Group consultants provided training and served as a resource for the parish and cluster teams.

**Step Five: Cluster responses to Planning Commission.** Each cluster submitted its response and accompanying rationale to the Planning Commission, indicating areas of agreement and disagreement and stating once more why they thought their preferred future would strengthen the ministry and presence of the Church in their area.

**Step Six: Second Planning Commission retreat.** The Planning Commission met again on retreat, facilitated by The Reid Group, to consider each cluster response. In a spirit of prayer and deep reflection, the Commission developed final recommendations and rationale and sent them to the bishop for careful review.

**Step Seven: Bishop deliberation.** After receiving the Planning Commission recommendations, the bishop took several months for prayer, reflection and consultation before announcing his final decisions. According to canon law, a bishop must consult with the Presbyteral Council and other bodies regarding any merger of parishes. The bishop's decisions then became directives to be implemented by all the clusters.

**Step Eight: Planning for Implementation.** Once the bishop announced his decisions, all the parishes participated in training sessions by The Reid Group consultants to help plan for the successful implementation of the directives. There was a five-month period of planning for implementation before any structural changes were made.

The parish and cluster teams took their participation in the process very seriously. As one team member said, "I am very excited to be able to contribute to the formation of a new parish community resulting from the merger of four parishes. This is a sacred obligation that only comes along every 50-100 years. I believe it is the work of the Holy Spirit."

## **Outcomes**

The diocese experienced a number of measurable changes as a result of the eight-step process:

- Many priests reported fuller churches and more vibrant liturgies.
- After 12-18 months, ordinary income increased.
- The diocese moved from more than 200 parishes to about 120.
- Because all the parishes worked together with the bishop and diocesan leaders to create the new reality, there was a greater sense of unity throughout the diocese.
- The process evoked a positive spirit expressed as the reality that all are members of the Body of Christ—and avoided the pitfall of "winners" and "losers."
- The diocese as a whole realized an opportunity to move beyond structural change to the change of mind and heart about what a vibrant parish is and how important spiritual renewal is.