

Chippewa Falls Area Planning Updates #2

April - May 2021

As part of the comprehensive study of parishes and schools in Chippewa Falls, this update is provided as an informational resource so that all parishioners and school parents are made aware of the developments in the process. All three parishes in Chippewa Falls have contracted with Meitler, a Milwaukee-based national Catholic school and parish consulting firm, to facilitate this process. The full draft of the plan, **Pastoral Plan**, can be accessed on the McDonell Area Catholic Schools website at <https://www.mcdonellareacatholicschools.org/faith-service/meitler.cfm>.

Please note that the priest personnel changes which have been announced over the past weekends were already under consideration prior to the beginning of this strategic planning process. The changes do provide for maximum flexibility for the parishes as the plan continues to be developed: if parish collaboration moves in the direction of one pastor, the parishes can move in that direction; if not, a separate pastor for Holy Ghost could be appointed within the next few years.

What is being proposed as the vision and priorities for the future?

While the Leadership Team and Task Force are still working on a vision phrase, they have reached consensus on four priorities for the future in the Chippewa Falls area. These priorities are:

- **Greater collaboration in ministry, personnel and resources** – building on decades of collaboration and sharing among the parishes, there is agreement that further steps should be taken to introduce more ministries, reduce duplicated services and increase economic efficiencies.
- **Emphasis on evangelization** – even with projected population growth, there is an urgency for the parishes to focus “outside” of the community rather than just “inside” in order to faithfully proclaim the Gospel.
- **Building a community of disciples through an overwhelming sense of welcome** – our faith is all about relationships and so the future must be shaped by welcome, invitation and the development of a sense of belonging to a loving community of followers of Jesus.
- **Respecting our past while seeking future parish vitality** – the Chippewa Falls area has a rich tradition of fidelity to the Gospel which is to be treasured. This history also challenges us to answer the call for our generation and future generations of faithful to create new chapters and signs of an ever-vibrant faith community.

What is being proposed as possible options for the organization of the parishes in the future?

One of the findings during the study phase of the process was the satisfaction that many people have with their parishes. On one hand, there are people who would say, “let’s keep things as they are.” On the other hand, all of us are aware that change impacts everything about life, including the church. Things do not stay the same because we age and interact with new developments. Most of us are trying

to get better at living out our faith and at whatever we do. Your parishes are also trying to become even more effective at proclaiming the Gospel and spreading God's light to all those places where it needs to shine.

Here are the possible options for the organization of the parishes in the future which have been proposed.

- Merge the three Chippewa Falls parishes into one – Our Lady of the Falls – keeping all the churches open and being served by one pastor, several associate pastors, one staff and one parish and finance council.
- Cluster the parishes by increasing collaboration and move toward a merger.
- Cluster the parishes by increasing collaboration and move toward one pastor, several associates pastors, one staff, and one parish council. Parishes would each retain a finance council.

What examples are there of parishes which already function in these ways?

Many Catholics do not realize that on a national basis, more than half the parishes in the United States have been involved with mergers or clustering. In a matter of a few decades, parishes now function in these manners as commonly as the one parish/one pastor model. Why is that? There are number of factors but the most likely are: changing demographics, proximity of parishes to one another, and costs to operate parishes effectively.

Here are some examples from around the Midwest.

Woodruff, Wisconsin (Diocese of Superior)

The Minocqua-Woodruff area currently has a year-round population of 6,500 and a much larger summer population. In 2004, St. John Vianney Parish in Lake Tomahawk, St. Patrick's Parish in Minocqua, and Our Lady Queen of the Universe Parish in Woodruff were merged. The existing churches were used until a new church was thoughtfully designed and constructed at a new location in Woodruff in 2007. The multi-million-dollar project was paid off in ten years. The parish has become one of the largest in the diocese, serving a large summer population. The parish developed an outdoor setting for Sunday Masses, weather-permitting and the large seating capacity in the church accommodates travelers from a wide-radius. The parish is extremely active in its ministries and involves a large number of volunteers in those ministries. A strategic pastoral plan was recently completed which calls for an emphasis on discipleship and the future construction of a parish center which was the one building not completed from the original plan.

Port Washington, Wisconsin (Archdiocese of Milwaukee)

The City of Port Washington is located on the shores of Lake Michigan just north of the City of Milwaukee. The population has grown steadily to approximately 12,000 residents. In 2011, the three parishes in the Port Washington area – St.

Peter of Alcantara, St. Mary, and Immaculate Conception of Saukville – formed a cluster of parishes. The two priests were appointed by the bishop to serve the three parishes as a team. Over the next five years, the parish combined all staff and ministries and formed a single parish council. With the retirement of one of the priests in 2016, the parish decided to merge and become St. John XXIII Parish. The parish continues to use all three churches on Sundays and has sold off all unused buildings. The elementary school was able to be combined into one campus and a multi-million-dollar campaign was conducted to add a gathering space to the church and additional classrooms for the school. The school had been separately incorporated as Port Washington Catholic and was supported by all three parishes. The school also merged with the parish and is now St. John XXIII School. The parish anticipates further growth as people move to be close to Lake Michigan and still have a reasonable drive-time to downtown Milwaukee.

Waukegan, Illinois (Archdiocese of Chicago)

Waukegan is now a city of nearly 88,000 people and had 10 Catholic parishes. In 2009, the parishes of Holy Family, Immaculate Conception, and Queen of Peace merged to become Most Blessed Trinity Parish. These three parishes had previously merged with several ethnic parishes. The new parish was created from six parishes. All the parishes had declining memberships prior to the mergers. Soon after the most recent merger, the parish was celebrating 250 baptisms per year. The three churches of Most Blessed Trinity continue to be used for Sunday Mass. Interestingly, there was need for a larger worship space, so the parish purchased a vacant Baptist church and enlarged it. Since the merger, parish growth has been dynamic. At 7,000 individuals attending Sunday Mass, the parish has become the largest in the Archdiocese of Chicago. The parish was able to open a new school, Most Blessed Trinity Academy, in a school building which had formerly been closed.

How will the proposed plan impact some of the ministries in Chippewa Falls?

Here are some highlights from the plan which illustrate the potential impact these recommendations could have on ministries in the area.

- **Faith Formation and Evangelization** – all child and youth religious education would be coordinated with MACS and a ministry to 20- and 30-year-olds would be initiated.
- **Worship and Prayer** – develop a Sunday and weekday Mass schedule for the area and study ways to expand welcome and hospitality at all liturgical celebrations.
- **Social Justice** – combine all the social justice committees and projects under one, common committee and study the needs in the area and which parishes can best collaborate with local agencies.
- **Stewardship and Communications** – create an area-wide approach to communications with parishioners and establish ways to welcome, orient and involve parishioners.
- **Finances and Facilities** – a study committee is already underway to look at the condition, usage, and needs which will lead to a master plan for maintenance, updates and, if needed, eventual replacement of facilities. All fund-raising by parishes and schools will be coordinated.
- **Schools** – the role of advancement and fund-raising in the revenue stream will be emphasized and the program for one- and two-year-old children will be eventually phased out.

What Happens Next?

You are all invited to participate in the survey of parishioners about the plan. The survey will be conducted in one of two ways: online or a hard copy. The online survey is available at <http://survey.meitler.com/s3/ChippewaFallsVision>. Hard copies of the survey can be picked up or filled out at the parish or school. The results of the survey will be very helpful in the further development of the plan. Thank you in advance for your participation.

A final meeting for all parishioners will be held on Wednesday, June 2, 2021, from 7:00 - 8:30 pm at McDonell High School.

Frequently Asked Questions About Chippewa Falls Planning

1. Why should the parishes consider any changes for the future?

We know that the major motivations for the parish leadership in Chippewa Falls to plan for the future are rooted in a desire to carry out the mission of Jesus in its fullness and to use all the parish resources wisely. By doing so, the parishes are looking to the future with hope. We know from the demographic studies that there is population growth projected for the Chippewa Falls area. That is good news. The growth will be steady but moderate. From parish data studies, we know that there are two to three times as many funerals as baptisms and that sacramental reception is trending in decline. The membership of the parishes is aging. None of the parishes is in crisis right now but these parish trends are indicators that the parishes need to strategize how to reverse the trends. Parish leadership sees this as an opportunity to renew the vitality and mission effectiveness of all the parishes in the Chippewa Falls area.

2. Who is driving the push for change?

The parishes have a history of responding to challenges in a collaborative manner. In 1987, facing the potential of parish schools having to close, the parishes worked together and established MACS. MACS continues to be financially solvent, its enrollment stable, and capacity high. At the time of the consolidation of the schools, there was discussion about merging the parishes. As recently as 2010, a proposal was submitted and discussed about merging the parishes at that time. Neither the Diocese of La Crosse nor MACS is pushing an agenda. There were a number of factors which converged and led the parish and school leadership to seek outside consulting help to move forward into the future:

- the elementary school buildings are old and in need of update;
- the elementary schools are at full capacity with no room for growth; and,
- parishes invest nearly 60% of their contributions to the school and do not have the capital for major building improvements or ministries.

In order to receive professional guidance and access to best practices, the parishes contracted with Meitler, a consulting group from Milwaukee which has served Catholic schools, dioceses and parishes for 50 years, to assist with a strategic planning process for the parishes and schools. The process began in November of 2020.

3. Will any of the churches close?

None of the churches are being considered for closure. All of the churches will continue to be open for Sunday Masses and other sacramental celebrations.

4. What is a merger of parishes?

With the approval of the bishop and after consultation with the presbyteral council (council of priest representatives), parishes can be merged into a single new parish, with a new name, one pastor, associate pastors, one staff and one parish and finance council. The new parish can have multiple

churches with each church retaining its name. All finances are combined but endowments and restricted funds remain distinct so they can be used as the donors have requested. A merger of parishes is the ultimate collaboration – parishes have worked together so closely that they choose to be one in name and in all their activity.

5. What is a cluster of parishes?

Parishes are clustered or partnered when they begin to share a pastor. This sharing of pastors can lead to various other kinds of collaboration, such as the sharing of staff, programs, ministries and resources. Clustering provides parishes with the opportunity to better steward and maximize their financial resources. Shared expenses are usually paid through an assessment which is typically based on a percentage of the parish's annual contributions. This is the same type of formula which has been in place with MACS. If the parishes in Chippewa Falls were to cluster under one pastor and associate pastors, there could be one staff and one parish council. Finance councils and finances would remain separate.

6. What will happen to St. Peter and St. Bridget?

At this point, most of the planning focus is on the future of the parishes in Chippewa Falls. However, St. Peter in Tilden and St. Bridget in Springfield are very much involved with this process. The Diocese of La Crosse is also involved in the process. There are multiple scenarios for these parishes:

- Chippewa Falls parishes can continue pastoring and providing ministry,
- The parishes could become full partners in the future plan of the Chippewa Falls parishes or
- The parishes could be pastored by other parishes in the vicinity.

7. Are we moving too fast with this process?

Time is of the essence to make important decisions about the future. Keep in mind that many of the issues being discussed have been under consideration since 1987 or for more than 30 years. Parish and diocesan leaders are very aware that the support of parishioners is essential for any future change. Having serious and open discussion about future issues is definitely a positive for all the parishes. No implementation timeline or deadline has been set for the plan. The parishes, in consultation with the Bishop, will likely propose a gradual transition into an organizational model which has the best strategic and mission impact for the Chippewa Falls area.

8. How are parish finances, endowments and special funds affected by further collaboration of the parishes?

Endowments and special funds are “restricted funds” which means they may not be combined into a general fund or used for any purposes other than those for which the funds are intended. The exception would be if parishes have funds for the same purposes. These could be considered for consolidation and the potential for greater investment return. If the parishes are clustered, there is no change to the current way finances are managed. Each parish retains control of its own income, expenses and investments. However, a shared business manager could manage each parish's finances and generate a regular accounting of financial operation for each parish. This already occurs with St. Peter and St. Bridget. With a merger, all the funds are merged into a single new parish account and accounting system.

9. How will a plan be implemented?

Once the direction of the plan is determined, a timeline will be developed for the implementation. As the process has moved forward, while there is support for a fast implementation, it is becoming apparent that there may be greater support for a more gradual timeline.

10. What are the advantages of merging or clustering?

The parishes can look to their histories to realize the potential impact of a parish merger or cluster. If the parishes had not acted to consolidate the Catholic schools in 1987, would any have survived to this day let alone be in the condition of the system? Collaboration of the schools not only led to their survival but to the schools now thriving. The same can be true for the parishes. Collaboration will provide for ministerial, administrative and financial efficiencies. These changes in themselves will produce significant benefits. A single parish has the flexibility and resources to be able to take on more ministry and activity and accomplish more. Rather than competing with one another, the parishes can focus their common energies on more effectively carrying out the mission of Jesus which we have all shared all along.