

Pastoral Planning, Part 2

With all of the communications that have been put out about “Set Ablaze,” it’s hard to know what people know and don’t know. In conversations with parishioners, however, I have come to realize that some of the things that are to be implemented are not really well known and so this article will attempt to address some of these things, at least the ones I have heard about.

It will be very helpful to keep a general, preliminary point in mind, namely on the nature of human communication. This often involves some going back and forth in order to understand what’s being said, something you hopefully know from your everyday experience. Things don’t get explained perfectly, people assume you know something you don’t, the listener has assumptions in their mind based on past experience, and so on. It happens in marriages and every walk of life. The only way through it is to have a little patience (difficult for me too!) and be committed to going back and forth until whatever it is, is understood. We also need to keep our imaginations in check. Remember that it is especially the imagination that the tempter attacks.

With this in mind, let’s come back to “pastoral planning.” The bishop and chancery staff have spoken of “evaluating success” and at times, this has been misunderstood to mean that the bishop plans to evaluate the new structure, the pastorates that have now been formed. That is not the case. The bishop has no plans to evaluate his own decisions! It’s only the implementation by the priests that he plans to evaluate. There is no intention or plan or slightest consideration being given as to whether or not to keep the new pastorates, this new groupings of parishes. That question is not even on the radar. Rightly, wrongly, or neither, they’re here to stay (of course another bishop could come along later and decide to do something different).

Once again, what the *bishop* has decided is not up for evaluation. One of the things he has decided on, one that I’ve come to realize some people aren’t aware of, is that each pastorate must hire/have 3 positions: a “facilities manager” (i.e., maintenance), a “business manager,” and a person for “discipleship and evangelization” (i.e., teaching the faith). Each of these positions would be for the whole pastorate – i.e., 3 total, not 3 for each parish. This is not optional. If some pastor doesn’t fill these positions, he will be replaced with one who does. Is this reasonable? Before giving some address to that question, let me say first that very few priests were involved in the discussions that led to this structure or the diocesan requirements (the requirements are being called “parameters;” for example, these 3 positions). Would I do something different? Maybe, maybe not, probably, I don’t know. Are there downsides to this “plan” or structure? Of course, there are with any plan. Are there good things about it? The same is true for that question – there is with almost any plan or structure. Bearing that in mind, then, let me say a few words about these positions. At my previous assignment (with only 3 parishes) there was no one hired for maintenance and I spent an undue amount of time on maintenance issues. While that is part of parish priesthood, it became too big of a part. One of the elders at my previous assignment said to me, without me even mentioning the subject: you should hire somebody for maintenance that way you’d have more time for us sinners. It was one of the wisest things I’ve heard as a priest. Priests are still going to have to be involved but with one main person for this, priest involvement in maintenance becomes much less. For example, if the AC goes out at some parish, the priest tells the “facilities manager” – the AC is out...period, and he’s done with it until it’s figured out and estimates come in. I think the reason this “parameter” was put in is simply because the bishop, along with the priests involved, realized that maintenance was commanding just too much of priests’ time; it’s a never-ending issue. As for a “business-manager,” here we will really have to evaluate our needs. Big parishes, especially if they have a school, probably need something like a business manager but our needs are probably less. I would like to have the bookkeeping done in-house (right now each parish has the diocese do the bookkeeping) but I doubt – doubt, I don’t know for sure – that we will need someone full-time for that position. Maintenance and bookkeeping/finances are areas that the pastor needs to be involved with and keep an eye on (it is his responsibility). At the same time, they are more distant to the mission of the Church, much more so than teaching. Faith formation or “discipleship & evangelization” goes to the heart of the mission of the Church and this is one where priests will hopefully be much more directly involved. There are, however, a lot of details to take care of, too many to deal with. Like the other positions,

then, it is helpful to have someone committed to faith formation. In addition to wanting to standardize “administration,” I believe these were some of the thoughts of the bishop when mandating these positions.

As I’ve mentioned before I was not part of this planning process but I think that *one* of the reasons for forming bigger linkages (more parishes) was to make this sort of “administration” possible. In rural SD, an individual parish could not afford this. But, as I believe I mentioned in a previous article, the main reason for pastoral planning is that the number of priests is far less than the number of parishes, and this difference is expected to get larger over the next 10 years with priest retirements far exceeding ordinations. According to the information presented to priests by the chancery in August 2022, there are currently 75 active (i.e., non-retired) priests in the diocese – 5 of which are religious order priests. Of these, 10 are already eligible for retirement and over the next 10 years, an additional 21 will be eligible for retirement. There are also 10 priests assigned to “specialized ministry,” some of which (especially hospital chaplains) would be hard to do without. To summarize so far: with the priests we currently have, there would be: $75 - 10 - 21 - 10 = 34$ priests available for 117 parishes and 3 Newman Centers (in effect, 120 parishes). Given what we currently have for seminarians and what we had for ordinations over (say) the last 10 years, the estimated/hoped for number of new priests over the next 10 years is 15. Thus, in 10 years a best guess is about 44 priests available for about 120 parishes. This does not take into account possible health problems or early retirements for priests or priests who might decide to change dioceses. A 3 to 1 ratio does not sound bad for rural areas; I had 3 parishes, it’s not ideal but it is manageable. However, newly ordained priests cannot be expected to be pastors right away and, furthermore, bigger parishes have bigger demands and need multiple priests (more weddings, baptisms, funerals, etc). So without penciling it out, the expected ratio of priests to parishes is probably more like 1 priest for every 5 or 6 parishes, at least in rural areas. Adding to the difficulty is the great loss of faith in the world today and thus declining parish sizes. So, what to do? That is the issue that had to be addressed and “Set Ablaze,” and all it entails, is “the answer” that is now put forth for our diocese.

One thing this brings out is that, unfortunately, the days of 1 priest, 1 parish, and 1 staff – all located at that parish – are, for now, done. No one likes this, especially priests; I don’t know of any priest who wouldn’t like to have just one parish, and in bigger parishes even 2 or 3 priests for one parish. To have that, however, at least 2/3 of our current parishes would have to be closed and rural (i.e., less populated) areas would necessarily get hit the hardest; a rural parish would probably have, at best, only about a 30% chance of staying open.

This is simply a reality we have to accept, one that won’t change in the near future. This means we’re going to have put our heads to the wind and make the best of it. But what does “make the best of it” mean? I cannot reiterate or emphasize this point enough. The Church is not a human organization, it is not a place for me to come and do fun things, it is not a place “for me to shine,” or just a nice place to go for visiting, or a place for me to have some work or activity to do, it is not a business or a club or any other such thing. Hopefully a parish is, in part, such a place for some of those things but that is not the essence of the Church. The Church is a Divine Institution and its purpose is to serve the Lord, to teach and sanctify, to be our means to eternal life, **a place to pray**, to work out our salvation with a trembling hand as St Paul puts it, a place to come to know the Lord in a deep and intimate way, a place to prepare for that supreme moment when I go and stand before the judgement seat of our Lord. Parishes could lose all of their property, staff, and so on and yet the Church would live on – just like in the French Revolution. The human dimension of the Church is experiencing a real death and it is something to mourn. There *are* practical things to deal with, *but* if we let external things (even external things within the Church) rather than interior life dominate our minds, then this death *will* continue. God *alone*, gives life and give it He will if we truly deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. This is the way, the only way, to “make the best of it.” I will make plenty of mistakes in administration – I already have – and I will keep trying to do better in that area because it is part of parish priesthood. But no matter how good that is or how much people get what they want in that regard, it will *not* give life. On behalf of our Lord I plead with you – let us fix, absolutely fix, this in our minds...on *truly* conforming ourselves to the Lord and doing His will. There is no other way. Jesus, I trust in You.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.