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July 8, 2015

Dear Fathers and parishioners of the Inverness Deanery,

I am writing to you as a follow-up to the Pastoral Planning discussions that have taken place in the Inverness Deanery over the past year. These discussions have as their goal to ensure that parishioners of the entire Inverness Deanery get the pastoral care that they need for their spiritual lives.

This pastoral care is usually organized through parish communities gathered in a parish church where the preaching of the Word of God and the provision of the sacramental life are offered by the pastor with the assistance of various lay people. The reality experienced in many of our parishes makes us aware that we need some changes so that this pastoral care can be more effective, especially in light of the challenges within our diocese, including a declining number of priests, a declining and an aging number of parishioners who regularly attend church, a declining financial support, and an increase in the cost for goods and services associated with each parish.

Pastoral planning is a community based process that seeks to follow the call of Jesus to “make disciples” of all nations. All activities of the Diocese need to be directed toward the fulfillment of this mission. As many of our communities continue to decline in numbers, our parish communities often struggle to maintain buildings. Fund raising and financial concerns become a focus, and providing appropriate members of our ministry teams tends to make us perpetually seeking to maintain the structures and programs that we have. However, our calling as the followers of Jesus is to follow His “mission.” The true work of planning for the “pastoral” undertakings demands that we become a people who devote our time, talent and treasures to reaching out with the message of the Lord. We need to ask the serious questions of how we continue to invite people into the faith, support them on their journey and continue to reach out to others.

The pastoral work of Christians, and indeed the goal of any parish, is to “make disciples.” Our work must be directed to the creating of disciples, which demands that we challenge those attitudes where our focus is rooted around a particular church building or other structure. When our communities were created, worthy buildings were erected to meet the spiritual needs of parishioners of a particular area. However, it has become increasingly clear that the resources available to serve the needs of parishioners have changed. We need to “read the signs of the times” as the Second Vatican Council urged us, and make decisions to ensure that the needs of the Catholic community are met now and for the future.

We have witnessed, all over our diocese, a sharp decline in church attendance and commitment by people to their parishes. Revenues have dropped and, for many places, once thriving ministries and faith formation programs are but shadows of their former days. We no longer can continue to pray, worship, minister, and operate in such a radically altered climate without asking ourselves in what new ways must we engage our people in the life of the Church. Our world has become increasing more global, and the geographic boundaries of our daily life have expanded (for school, doctors, shopping, entertainment, sports, etc). We also need to consider our traditional parish borders to see how they might be aligned to serve better our needs as disciples. Our young people have broader horizons, and while this may be challenging and dislocating, we need to look beyond our present circumstances and openly ask where God may be calling us in 2015, in the Inverness County.

Last year, the Pastoral Planning Committee invited the parishioners of the Inverness Deanery to meet and consider how best we might organize our parishes so that the Church might carry out in an effective way the mission of Christ, even in the midst of the challenges that we face in this Deanery. We recognize that the population continues to decline in many of these parishes. Moreover, our population is also aging radically as a result of the loss of our young people. These factors call us to action as we recognize the population decline coupled with the decline in those who regularly attend church as well as the decline in the number of priests available for pastoral ministry (from 82 diocesan priests in 1996 to 41 diocesan priests in 2015). With the age of our priests and the average loss of priests over the past number of years, in the near future, we may have only around 30 diocesan priests to serve less than 100 churches.

Within the Inverness Deanery, the population is decreasing and getting older and many of the parishes struggle to meet the financial demands expected in a viable parish. A viable parish is one with sufficient population to ensure a celebration of the Eucharist that has all the ministries available so that the liturgy will nourish all present, one that can provide the basic ministries of word, worship, service, and leadership, one that can have the appropriate number of ministerial personnel, including priests, deacons and lay ministers, one that has an adequate population with appropriate numbers of parishioners attending Sunday liturgies, one that can extend formation to all the members of the faith community, one that can operate with the average financial contribution of parishioners, one that recognizes the number of parishes nearby and the distance between parishes, one where the need for pastoral care is considered (the number of baptisms, funerals, marriages, enrollment in religious education classes, presence of nursing homes), one where the size and physical condition of the church and parish buildings will serve the needs of the parish, and one where special characteristics, such as language, are acknowledged.

During the past year, the Pastoral Planning Committee for the Inverness Deanery has reviewed the financials of each parish, the attendance numbers versus capacity for each church in the Deanery, the demographics for parishes, and the distances between churches in the Deanery. We have considered the age and number of priests that we will have available for ministry in the future. Finally we looked at what makes a parish sustainable. Further, in November 2014 parishes in the Deanery were invited to general meetings, one held in Port Hood and the other in South West Margaree. The challenges facing the Diocese were presented and discussed. Parishes and individuals

were asked to make suggestions as to how to deal with these challenges and to submit them to the committee by February 15, 2015. All responses were considered by the Committee and a proposal was circulated within the Deanery seeking responses by June 1, 2015.

In its discussions, the Pastoral Planning Committee began to focus on the creation of a larger team which could be appointed with responsibility for the pastoral care of several parishes together, called a Pastoral Zone. With the support of the priests of the deanery, this committee recommended that the deanery be divided into two Pastoral Zones, with a team of priests, deacons and lay people to oversee the spiritual needs of the parishioners of the Pastoral Zone. Focusing energies in a larger area (as the whole diocese will be doing in the near future), means asking questions about the quality of our faith formation programs for the pastoral zone; about what ministries are active for outreach to the poor, marginalized, young families, and youth; about whether our liturgical ministries are vibrant and growing; and about what real hospitality looks like. Beginning in September, priests, lay leaders and parishioners will be educated and formed in the understanding of collaboration so that we can create the structures that will allow the best use of our resources for the future.

Further consultation was done with the Council of Priests and the priests of the Deanery. After carefully considering all the responses with the Pastoral Planning Committee, I am presenting the following plan to provide the framework for the organization of the most effective pastoral care of the parishioners within the Inverness Deanery, now and into the future. This will involve the creation of Pastoral Zones, something that will mean that we will have to evaluate continuously how these need to be developed.

1. By June 2016, the Inverness Deanery will be restructured into two Pastoral Zones: Inverness North and Inverness South. Inverness North Pastoral Zone will include the following parishes: Stella Maris (Inverness), St Margaret of Scotland (Broad Cove), St. Joseph (South West Margaree), St. Michael (East Margaree), St. Patrick (North East Margaree), St. Joseph (St. Joseph du Moine) and St. Peter (Cheticamp). The French language and culture will be a consideration in this zone (and as we organize these Zones, we may have to create a third Pastoral Zone to care for French concerns). Inverness South Pastoral Zone will include: St Mary (Mabou), St John the Baptist (Brook Village), Immaculate Conception (West Lake Ainslie), St. Joseph (Glencoe Mills), St. Peter (Port Hood), St. Andrew (Judique), and Stella Maria (Creignish). St. Joseph (Port Hawesbury) will be placed in another pastoral zone at a later date.

2. Beginning in September, both zones will begin the process of education and formation in a Collaborative Model of Ministry and will begin to lay the foundation for a Pastoral Council for each pastoral zone, with a major emphasis on reaching out through evangelization. By June 2016, a Pastoral Team will be appointed by the Bishop, consisting of at least two priests per zone (appointed as co-pastors or as pastor and associate) and several lay people. The team could include such people as a deacon(s), Coordinator for Faith Formation (including the catechesis of children), Liturgy Coordinator, Office Manager and/or Business Administrator and other roles, as needed. Other priests present in the zone may be involved to assist with some pastoral activities within the zone.

3. Beginning in September, parishes will attempt to develop an attitude of collaboration and

parishioners will be asked to identify not so much with their parish, but more with the larger zone. Once a Pastoral Team has been appointed, a Pastoral Council in each zone will be established to oversee efforts of working together as a single unit, e.g., common sacramental preparation and coordination of liturgical celebrations. With the reduced number of priests, the new configuration will provide weekend mass in most churches, but some churches will likely close, while others will have reduced services. The Diocese will continue to assist each zone as it decides the future viability to some of these churches.

Incumbent upon us all, laity working with pastors, is the necessity of examining how we manage all our economic and our human resources. It is clear that we have an ageing clergy and very few vocations. We are no longer able to support and sustain ministry in the ways we have become accustomed. The question facing us together is how do we work together with our clergy to ensure that we are supporting and nourishing healthy and holy ways of engaging in ministry for both laity and clergy, so that all have the pastoral care that we need.

Since most of the parishes in the Deanery are rural, their churches play an important role in the community. Yet many of these churches have very small congregations, making them increasingly more difficult to keep as viable parishes. The committee believes that the creation of pastoral zones in the Inverness Deanery is the best way to serve the people in the midst of the challenges of decreasing population and the reality that we will have fewer priests to serve us.

These are difficult times for all of us and yet, we need to prepare ourselves so that we can face the future with hope that we will have faith communities that will be vibrant places where parishioners can find God, care for and support one another, and grow spiritually. The plan for Pastoral Zones will challenge all of us to be patient with one another as we try to formulate the best way to care for the pastoral concerns of all parishioners. In this way, we will be able to provide the witness that is needed as we move forward knowing that the Lord gives us the strength, courage and new life to be his disciples in our world today.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Brian J. Dunn". The signature is written in a cursive style.

† Brian Joseph Dunn
Bishop of Antigonish