

**Office of the Bishop**  
Diocese of Antigonish  
168 Hawthorne Street, P.O. Box 1330  
Antigonish, NS B2G 2L7  
Chancery 902-863-3335 / Fax 902-863-0037  
Residence 902-863-1557  
E-mail: [bishopdunn@dioceseofantigonish.ca](mailto:bishopdunn@dioceseofantigonish.ca)

July 24, 2015

Dear Fathers and parishioners of the Pictou Deanery,

I am writing to you as a follow-up to the Pastoral Planning discussions that have taken place in the Pictou Deanery over the past year. These discussions have as their goal to ensure that parishioners of the entire Pictou 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 treasure 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 primary 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 increasingly more global, and the geographic boundaries of our daily life have expanded (for schools, doctors, hospital care, shopping, entertainment, municipalities, 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 Pictou County.

Last year, the Pictou Deanery Pastoral Planning Committee invited the parishioners of the Pictou 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 Pictou Deanery, the population is decreasing and getting older and some 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.

The Pastoral Planning Committee for the Pictou Deanery has reviewed the financials of each parish, the attendance numbers versus capacity for each church in the Deanery, the Demographics for Pictou County, and the distances between churches in the Deanery. We have considered the age and

numbers of priests that we will have available for ministry in the future. Finally we looked at what makes a parish sustainable. Further, on January 11, 2015, parishes in the Deanery were invited to a general meeting. The challenges facing the Diocese were presented and discussed. The parishes and or individuals were asked to make suggestions as to how to deal with these challenges and to submit them to the committee by March 15, 2015. After considering suggestions, the discussion and the recommendations, the Pastoral Planning Committee on May 27, 2015, presented a proposal to all the parishes in the Deanery seeking comments or suggestions in writing by July 15, 2015. The Committee also received a consultant's report on the condition, quality, deferred maintenance and general property observations on the churches of Holy Name (Westville), Our Lady of Lourdes (Stellarton), and St. John the Baptist (New Glasgow). As well, the Committee received an initial estimate of the costs of the maintenance needed on Our Lady of Lourdes Church (Stellarton)

In its discussions, the Pastoral Planning Committee considered the fact that by October of 2015, only two priests will be available to serve the parishes of the County. The Committee began to focus on the importance of Collaborative Ministry as is happening in other areas of the diocese. This will involve the creation of a Pastoral Zone, whereby a pastoral team of priests and lay people could be appointed with responsibility for the pastoral care of all the parishes in the County. The two priests of the deanery agreed to move in this direction in order to oversee the spiritual needs of all the parishioners. 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, a process of education and formation on the understanding of collaboration will take place so that we can create the structures that will allow the best use of our resources for the future.

After carefully considering all the responses with the Pastoral Planning Committee and after consulting the priests of the Deanery, I am presenting the following plan to provide the framework for the organization of the most effective pastoral care of the parishioners within the Pictou Deanery, now and into the future. This will involve the creation of a Pastoral Zone, something that will have to be evaluated as to how it needs to be developed within the Pictou Deanery.

- (1) This plan acknowledges that the parishes in the Pictou Deanery were served by four priests and by the end of October of this year, the Deanery will be served by only two priests. Lismore has been considered in the Pastoral Plan for Antigonish/Guysborough Deanery.
- (2) St. Ann Church and Parish (Thorburn) will close on August 23, 2015.
- (3) Christ the King Church and Parish (Trenton) will close on September 9, 2015.
- (4) In light of the fact that it is increasingly more difficult to maintain financially the three parishes of Holy Name (Westville), Our Lady of Lourdes (Stellarton), and St. John the Baptist (New Glasgow), it has been decided to close one of them. Therefore, Our Lady of Lourdes (Stellarton) will close at the end of October 2015, recognizing the needed maintenance and structural concerns of the Church which would incur major capital costs and expenditures to the parish.
- (5) Holy Name Church (Westville), Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church (Pictou Landing),

St. John the Baptist Church (New Glasgow), and Stella Maris Church (Pictou) will focus on the hospitality necessary to welcome those parishioners who will be affected by the closure of their parish churches.

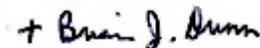
(6) During the coming year, the parishes in the County will be organized as a Pastoral Zone, with a pastoral team, including the two priests, being appointed to oversee the care of all the parishes.

Parishioners in various parishes will have a variety of responses to this plan, including a sense of loss and grief, a sense of disappointment and anger, the need to be welcomed to new churches, etc. As a faith community within this whole deanery, we need to assist one another as we move through this period of transition, especially by making efforts to collaborate with one another.

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.

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 a Pastoral Zone 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,



† Brian Joseph Dunn  
Bishop of Antigonish