

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

May 29, 2014

Dear Fathers and parishioners of the Richmond Deanery,

I am writing to you as a follow-up to the Pastoral Planning discussions that have taken place in the Richmond Deanery over the past year. These discussions have as their goal to ensure that parishioners of the entire Richmond 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.

Reflection on these matters points us to the core of our faith where we deeply desire to follow Jesus Christ within the Christian community with the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit who leads us in new directions. Yet, so many challenges can discourage us. At the same time, we believe that the Spirit guides us and the Lord walks with us as He walked with his disciples. He listens to our disappointment, disillusionment, sadness and anger and assists us to discover his presence even in these experiences. Most especially He helps us to recognize Him in the midst of our brokenness, makes our hearts burn within as we become excited about our faith. Once we recognize Him in the breaking of the bread, we realize that his presence fills us with hope and new life and inspires us to return to our communities with a fresh experience because we can witness to His abundant life of grace.

In the midst of this experience, we need to consider how best do we organize our parishes so that our spiritual lives can best be nurtured. Without a doubt, the number of churches at present cannot be sustained.

Last year, the Pastoral Planning Committee invited the parishioners of the Richmond 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 our parishes in the Richmond Deanery. We recognize that the population of Cape Breton Island indicates that we are losing about one thousand people each year. 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 2014). 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 about 100 churches.

Within the Richmond Deanery, the population is decreasing and getting older and many of the parishes struggle to meet their 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, various groups within the deanery provided recommendations and strategies to suggest how the parishes could best use our resources to create faith filled communities. The various groups submitted reports and suggestions and these submissions formed the basis of the document of the Pastoral Planning Committee entitled, "Proposal for the Parishes of the Richmond Deanery, April 2014." Further responses were sought from the parishes. Parish committees, groups and numerous individuals responded with letters, oral submissions and additional proposals. 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 Richmond Deanery, now and into the future.

1. In September of 2014, St. Mary of the Angels (Glendale), St. Francis de Sales (Lower River Inhabitants), and St. Louis (Louisdale) will form a cluster of parishes served by one priest. The priest will reside in Lower River Inhabitants. In June of this year, St. Margaret (West Bay Road) will discontinue having regular church services and will only be open occasionally for (mass, funerals, baptisms etc.). Since St. Dionysius, River Denys and St. Patrick, Whiteside have not been used for services for over two years, these two churches will close.

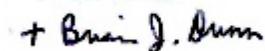
2. The parishes on Isle Madame are Our Lady of the Assumption (Arichat), Immaculate Conception Church (West Arichat), St Joseph (Petit De Grat), and St. Hyacinth (D'Escousse). In September 2014, Immaculate Conception Church and St. Hyacinth Church will be closed and will not be used for liturgical services. Our Lady of the Assumption Church and St. Joseph Church will be the two churches used year around to serve the liturgical needs of the parishioners of Isle Madam. The parishes will discuss their needs regarding a Pastoral Centre and will report to the Diocese within six months.

3. In June 2014, St. John the Baptist (River Bourgeois), Holy Guardian Angels (L'Ardoise) and St. Peter (St. Peter's) will become a cluster served by one priest and he will reside in St. Peter's. Also in June 2014, Immaculate Conception Church (Barra Head) will remain open only for the occasional service and will close permanently after its anniversary celebrations in 2015.

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 large faith community, we need to assist one another as we move through this period of transition, especially by collaborating with one another. Committees will be established to offer assistance and direction through all these changes.

These are difficult times for all of us and yet, we need to prepare ourselves so that we can face the future with hope and a sense 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. 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