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May 29, 2014

Dear Fathers and parishioners of the Antigonish/Guysborough Deanery,

I am writing to you as a follow-up to the Pastoral Planning discussions that have taken place in the Antigonish/Guysborough Deanery over the past year. These discussions have as their goal to ensure that parishioners of the entire Antigonish/Guysborough 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 Antigonish/Guysborough 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 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 Antigonish/Guysborough 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, 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 Antigonish/Guysborough Deanery, March 5, 2014." Further responses were sought from the parishes. Parish committees, groups and 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 Antigonish/Guysborough Deanery, now and into the future.

1. On October 8, 2014, Saint Ninian's Cathedral will have one priest with the understanding that services will have to be reduced. The second priest will be assigned on a part time basis to the parish with secondary duties at St. Martha's Hospital.
2. Within the next five years, Holy Cross (Pomquet), Immaculate Conception (Heatherton), Saint Andrew (St. Andrew's), and St. Francis (Giant's Lake) will be served by one priest. At that time, St. Francis will have services (mass, funerals, baptisms) a few times a year.
3. Within the next five years, St. Margaret (Arisaig), St. Mary (Lismore), Holy Rosary (Ballantyne's Cove), St. Columba (Lakevale), St. George (Georgeville), St. Mary (Maryvale), will be served by one priest. St. Ann (Thorburn) will be served by a New Glasgow area parish. Saint

Columba will have weekly Sunday mass and the Parish Priest will reside in Lakevale. Holy Rosary and St. George will be open in the summer (May to October) and St. Mary (Maryvale) will be open in the winter (November to April). St. Margaret and St. Mary (Lismore) will have services on alternate weekends. All these parishes need to begin to collaborate immediately.

4. In June 2015, St. Peter (Tracadie), St. Monica (Lincolnvile), St. Lawrence (Mulgrave), St. Paul (Havre Boucher), and St. Francis (St. Francis Harbour) will be served by one priest. At that time St. Monica and St. Francis will have services (mass, funerals, baptisms) a few times a year. During this coming year, these parishes are asked to establish a committee to discuss the issues connected with this new arrangement.

5. The parishes St. Joseph (St. Joseph's), St. Patrick (Lochaber), St. Paul (Sherbrooke) will continue to be served by a priest for the time being. This arrangement will be reviewed within the next year.

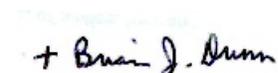
6. The parishes of Star of the Sea (Canso), St. Vincent DePaul (Queensport), St. Agnes (Dover), St. Joseph's (Port Felix), make up a cluster of parishes in Guysborough. In June of 2014, St. Vincent de Paul and St. Agnes will close for the winter (November to April). Due to the depopulation of this area, it will become more and more difficult to sustain all these parishes and the Diocese will continue to monitor these parishes closely for viability.

7. The parishes of St. Ann's (Guysborough), St. Patrick (Guysborough Intervale), St. Thomas (Salmon River), St. Peter (Larry's River), and St. Joseph (Charlos Cove) form a second cluster in this county. St. Peter and St. Joseph will continue to alternate masses for the time being. Also, St. Thomas will alternate Sunday mass with St. Patrick, with a review of this arrangement in six months. Due to the depopulation of this area, it will become more and more difficult to sustain all these parishes and the Diocese will continue to monitor these parishes closely for viability.

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 making efforts to collaborate with one another.

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. 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