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Dear Fathers and parishioners of the Sydney Deanery,

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

Last year in May, the Pastoral Planning Committee invited the parishioners in the Sydney 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 Sydney 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 as a result of the loss of our young people, that is, the number of those under 20 years of age have decreased by 26% from 1996 to 2006, while over that same period the number of people over 50 has increased by 22%. 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 44 diocesan priests in 2012). With the age of our priests and the average loss of priests over the past number of years, in the near future, we will have only around 30 diocesan priests to serve over 100 churches in our diocese.

Within the Sydney Deanery, the population is decreasing and getting older and some of the twenty-two parishes struggle to meet the demands that are expected in a viable parish. This is what offers us much hope, that we can have viable parishes if we have fewer buildings. This is our motivation in restructuring our resources. We are coming together in a new and unified way to experience and express ourselves as more living and energized Catholic communities. The following is what I view as a viable parish, one where people will receive more and share more of the gifts of the Holy Spirit:

- 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 (music ministry, youth ministry, etc.);
- 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 (including participation in faith development programs offered in the diocese);
- 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;
- one where special characteristics are acknowledged.

During the past year, various groupings within the deanery provided recommendations and strategies to suggest how the parishes could best use our resources to create faithfilled communities. The various groups submitted reports in June and October 2011. These submissions formed the basis of the document of the Pastoral Planning Committee entitled, "Proposal for the Parishes of the Sydney Deanery, January 2012." Further responses were sought from the parishes. Parish committees, groups and individuals responded with letters, oral submissions and additional proposals. Consultation took place with the Council of Priests and the priests of the Sydney Deanery. After carefully considering all the responses with the Pastoral Planning Committee, I am presenting the following plan as a way to provide the framework for the organization of the most effective pastoral care of the parishioners within the Sydney Deanery, now and into the future.

1. A new parish will be established in Sydney in June 2013 with a new name and a Pastoral Team will be appointed to lead this new parish. This new parish will include the parishioners from the present parishes of Saint Joseph, Saint Anthony Daniel, Sacred Heart, Immaculate Heart (Mira Road) and Saint Anne's (Membertou). In June 2013, Immaculate Heart Church (Mira Road) will no longer be used and Sunday services at Saint Anne's Church (Membertou) will discontinue. Thus, the new parish will continue to use the other three present church buildings until June 2014. At that time, Saint Joseph's Church will be used for the new parish and Sacred Heart and Saint Anthony Daniel will no longer be used for services. Saint Joseph's Church building was selected for the new parish because it is the newest of all the buildings, and thus it can be operated efficiently; it was designed to reflect the liturgical principles of Vatican II, and it can accommodate all who at present attend the three parishes. Moreover, it has level access, plenty of parking, and office space in the church.
2. Within the next five years, Holy Rosary Church (Westmount) will no longer be used and the parishioners of Holy Rosary Parish (Westmount) will join Our Lady of Fatima Parish. Furthermore, it is most probable that another parish could eventually be formed of all the parishioners that make up the present parishes of Holy Redeemer, Saint Theresa's and Saint Mary's Polish.
3. By July 2012, St. Augustine's Church (Grand Lake Road) will no longer be used and the parishioners will be invited to join St. Theresa's Parish. By July 2012, St. Nicholas (Whitney Pier) will no longer be used and the parishioners will be invited to join Holy Redeemer Parish. St. Mary's (Polish) (Whitney Pier) will remain open until the end of their anniversary year (2013) and at that time, discussions will take place as to how the parishioners will best be served.
4. That within the next few years, the five churches in the rural area south of the Mira River,

including Stella Maris (Louisbourg), Immaculate Conception (Main à Dieu), St. Joseph's (Mira Ferry), Sacred Heart (Marion Bridge), and St. Margaret's (Grand Mira) will be served by one pastor. Services will be scheduled on a rotating basis.

5. That within the next few years, the rural area that includes St. Mary's (East Bay), St. Mary's (Big Pond), St. Rose of Lima (Northside East Bay), Sacred Heart (Johnstown) will be served by one pastor. Services will be limited at St. Rose of Lima and services will be celebrated at Big Pond and Johnstown during the summer months. Holy Family (Eskasoni) will remain as it is for the time being.

6. Parishioners in various parishes will have a variety of responses to these plans, 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. Therefore, the Diocese will be available to offer assistance and direction to parishes as they move through these difficult changes.

At the core of our faith we deeply desire to follow Jesus Christ within the Christian community. Our celebration of Pentecost reminds us of the powerful, creating presence of the Holy Spirit who leads us in new directions. These new directions often challenge and discourage us. At the same time we recognize and believe that the Spirit guides us, and the Lord walks with us, just as He walked with his disciples. He hears our disappointment, disillusionment, sadness and anger. Yet he assists and empowers us to discover his presence even in these experiences. He helps us recognize Him in the midst of our brokenness and makes our hearts burn within as we become renewed and excited about our faith; His presence fills us with hope and new life. This recognition in the midst of brokenness inspires us, calls us and invites us to return to our communities with a new freshness and zeal, witnessing to His abundant life of grace. In light of our experience of lived faith we know the present number of churches cannot be sustained and we must organize our parishes to nurture our spiritual lives more deeply.

We have a deep and rich history as a Diocese with many who have given of themselves in service of the community. This continues to be so with many involved in the work of building up the church and there are many examples of how this is being done, for example, many people are involved in faith formation, in Renewal Movements such as Cursillo and the Youth Retreat Movement Challenge, and many are engaged in preparation for the Diocesan Renewal Congress. These are but a few examples of how people are involved in our church and are all signs of hope for us as we face the future.

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,



† Brian Joseph Dunn
Bishop of Antigonish