

Thursday
March 18, 2010

The Catholic TIMES

Serving the Catholic Community of the Diocese of La Crosse

Consultation a big part of establishing Pastoral Plan protocols

By FRANZ KLEIN
Catholic Times Correspondent

LA CROSSE – Hundreds of letters from throughout the diocese made their way to Holy Cross Diocesan Center at the end of last year. Some came from individual parishioners and parish leaders, others from parish pastoral or finance councils.

Together with consultation forms submitted via a Web site set up for this express purpose, the mailed consultation forms came in response to the Pastoral Plan Phase II Steering Committee's request for comments, suggestions and critiques of its proposed protocols for implementing the Plan, should doing so become necessary.

"We at the Steering Committee were highly grateful to have these consultations, because it gives us an idea of where we're going and how we're doing things," said Ben Nguyen, diocesan chancellor and chairman of the Steering Committee. "Without these consultations, the process would just stop. We wouldn't know some of the nooks and crannies. They (the parishioners and parish leaders) can see how it would play out at the local level, and that's the feedback we need."

The consultation forms were requested from parish pastoral and finance council members, lay parish leaders and interested parishioners following a series of deanery presenta-



Ben Nguyen

tions that occurred from Oct. 13-29 of last year.

At each of these deanery presentations, a Steering Committee member spoke about the protocols for 1) Finances and Incorporation, 2) Communications and Public Awareness, 3) Staff Development and Formation, 4) Transitions in Parish Life and 5) Governance and Consultation that need to be established before parishes can be merged. Participants were asked to comment on what they perceived as the strengths and weaknesses of each set of protocols. The forms also asked for specific recommendations and other comments.

"People had a few months to respond to it," Nguyen said. "Then we went through every single suggestion, combined the ones where there were repeats and got a synthesis together for the full commit-

tee. So it was quite an extensive period where we went through every single one of the suggestions and considered them as a committee – why it would be good, why it wouldn't be good, whether we had addressed it already or not and, if not, whether there was something we could do to address it."

There are many suggestions that the committee has earmarked for further discussion on April 20, Nguyen said, when its five subcommittees will be meeting in Tomah. "One of the suggestions that's still going back and forth is how to determine parish names," he said. "The protocol that had been built in already was that there would be new parish names, but it came up repeatedly. Is this something we're going to require if new entities wanted to take one of the (old parishes') names? It's still an open question."

Even after April 20, Nguyen emphasized, these suggestions will still be on the table. "We're taking the suggestions seriously, but right now we're not sure yet how we're going to build them into the protocols," he said.

Many of the concerns people expressed on the forms, however, were due to misunderstandings regarding the Pastoral Plan, Nguyen said. For example, some parishioners and committees wrote to say they disagreed with the configuration established for their parishes. "But when



Bishop ListECKI accepted the plan, that whole period of consultation ended. The second phase now is only looking for suggestions on protocols, on how it's going to be done if the plan needs to be carried out, not what's going to be done."

While many people were concerned about finances, Nguyen emphasized that a parish with debt needs to have a plan in place to pay off that debt before it can be combined with another parish. Furthermore, he said parish endowments and other designated funds benefit the designated former parish or parish need, even after the old parish is combined into the new, larger parish.

"It's important to remember that this is a contingency plan," Nguyen said. "Also, no church building is going to be closed. Some people were thinking that if parishes are combined, their location isn't going to be used anymore. But that's the genius of the plan. It saves the locations and uses them as they were designated in Phase I."

Father John Schultz, pastor of St. James the Greater in

Eau Claire, said his pastoral and finance council members were glad to have been consulted. Many of them attended Monsignor Richard Gilles' Oct. 20 deanery presentation at Immaculate Conception in Eau Claire. They met later and discussed the presentation before submitting a consultation form to the Steering

Committee.

"They were generally in favor of the Plan," Father Schultz said. "They were pleased that the Plan is combining and not closing the parishes, although there was a clear understanding that combining has its own challenges."

St. James council members expressed concern regard-

ing the long term difficulty of combining parish finances, in addition to what Father Schultz described as a "sense of loss." "Even though nothing is being closed for the most part, there is still a sense of loss when a parish combination happens, when a parish name changes even if the church name doesn't."

The council members also suggested that more money be put into promoting vocations. "The hope is that the plan won't really have to go into effect or just in a few limited places," Father Schultz said. "And that's everybody's hope."