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Phase two of pastoral planning to begin

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LA CROSSE – Phase one of the diocese’s pastoral plan reached completion May 8 when Bishop Jerome E. ListECKI of the Diocese of La Crosse conducted a special prayer service and presented the approved plan to priests, diocesan curia members and lay parish representatives.

Phase one involved the compilation of a contingency plan that could gradually reduce the number of parishes in the diocese from 165 to 75 without closing a single church building. The plan will only take effect if a shifting Catholic population and the shrinking number of priests in active service necessitate it – and then only when and where it is needed.

A pastoral planning committee established by the bishop in 2005 worked on the pastoral plan over the course of nearly two years. Committee members presented their proposed plan to the laity of each deanery early in 2007, modified their plan and then submitted it to Bishop ListECKI last summer. After further consultations and some minor adjustments, the bishop approved a version of the plan May 8, bringing phase one to an end.

In a May 8 letter to the priests and lay faithful of the diocese, Bishop ListECKI announced the appointment of diocesan vicar general Monsignor Richard Gilles to head a



Representatives of the pastoral planning committee for phase one of the plan stand with Bishop ListECKI as he formally approves their work at Holy Cross Diocesan Center May 8. Pictured are Father Steven Kachel (l), St. Mary, Tomah; Father Robert Schaller, St. Elizabeth, Holmen; Father David Kunz, Mary Mother of the Church, La Crosse; and Monsignor Richard Gilles, diocesan vicar general. Other priests on the committee were Father Jeffrey Burill, St. Mary, Durand; Father Donald Meuret, Our Lady of Peace, Marshfield; Father G. Richard Roberts, Immaculate Conception, Fountain City; Father William Menzel, St. Vincent, Wisconsin Rapids; and Father John Schultz, St. James, Eau Claire. Bishop ListECKI has appointed Monsignor Gilles to chair the umbrella committee for phase two of the plan.

CT/Dan Rossini

steering committee for phase two of the plan, which will involve the formulation of the protocols and procedures needed for the plan’s possible implementation.

Broad-based committee

Although other members of this committee have yet to be appointed, Monsignor Gilles said May 8 that it would be “sufficiently broad-based to

draw in different constituencies across the diocese.”

Only two other members of the diocesan curia will sit on the steering committee, Monsignor Gilles said, although diocesan officials would contribute their expertise to various subcommittees.

Monsignor Gilles’ comments came within the context of a May 8 open-ended discussion with priests and lay par-

ish representatives in the Holy Cross Diocesan Center’s chapel.

During phase two, Monsignor Gilles explained, the steering committee “will come up with those protocols and policies by which the plan can be implemented.”

The steering committee “will take a look at the recommendations which came out of phase one and see how they

can unfold in reality in the context of the pastoral plan," he said.

Areas of expertise

He said the steering committee will function as a sort of "umbrella" committee for other committees dealing with all the legal, canonical and practical issues that come with closing or merging parishes in order to establish the "parish centers" and the various satellite buildings called for by the plan.

"The steering committee will help determine what committees need to come into existence," Monsignor Gilles said. "A committee will be needed for finances, real estate transfers, the whole area of consultation, and perhaps there's a liturgical aspect as well."

He also referred to other issues, such as keeping track of statistics and the sensitive issues that could arise in combining the finances of parishes in debt with parishes that are doing better financially.

"Where do things get sticky?

It's finances," Monsignor Gilles said.

Protocols before implementation

According to Monsignor Gilles, no official deadline has been set for the completion phase two, but this phase must be complete before the canonical suppression of parishes called for in the plan's implementation can take place.

"That doesn't mean that we can't realign parishes," he explained. "But as far as the canonical closing or suppressing of parishes, merging together of assets and all of that – that part we really want to hold off until phase two has done its work."

"We want to do this, and we want to do it well," Monsignor Gilles added.

Need for education

Several priests and others in attendance expressed concern regarding how people would react to the plan. They questioned, for example, whether enough was being done in

terms of preparing the people in the pews for the plan's implementation.

Sister Donna Webber, FSPA, pastoral associate at Sacred Heart, Wauzeka, was one of several people to speak of the need for education during phase two.

"This is a time in the Church for people to come alive, to be born, to be part of the history of the Church," Sister Donna said. "I think this is a real teaching moment for the laity, and of course for all of us, so the educational dimension is key."

Father Jeffrey Burrill, a member of the phase one committee, spoke in agreement. "As we went to the various deaneries" to present the pastoral plan, "we discovered that many people don't have an understanding of how the Diocese of La Crosse works with the parish, and how parishes work with other parishes," he said.

Another phase one committee member, Father Steven Kachel, concurred but said phase

two will help provide a picture of what types of education are needed. "There are varying circumstances throughout the diocese that dictate things in city parishes that they don't dictate in rural areas," he noted. "Phase two will be working out some of those nitty-gritty details so we can do proper education, and so we can put this plan into action effectively."

Building relationships

Father Alan Burkhardt, pastor of St. Joseph's Parish, Stevens Point, pointed out that building relationships between parishes and parishioners is perhaps even more important than educating people. "I think there needs to be consideration for what we do as pastors to begin to establish a relationship," he said, mentioning common liturgical celebrations as a possibility. "You can educate, but if you don't have a relationship it isn't going to work."