



Bishop Hicks' Monthly Column

October 2022

Pruning our diocesan tree so that we may thrive and grow

For anyone who lives in the Midwest or northern regions of the United States, news of consolidations, mergers and closings of Catholic parishes and schools has become a frequent reality. Across the country, Catholic dioceses and archdioceses are implementing or have completed restructuring processes, including Cincinnati, Columbus, Boston, Pittsburgh and St. Louis.

Closer to home, our neighbors on our diocesan borders also have begun or have been attending to these same issues. Specifically, the Archdiocese of Chicago has been engaged in a seven-year, proactive process of structural and spiritual renewal known as "Renew My Church." Also, just recently, the Diocese of Peoria announced its two-year process of pastoral planning called "Growing Disciples."

When I was installed as the bishop of the Diocese of Joliet two years ago, I was immediately inundated with statistics of too few pastors to cover too many parishes, especially as we project the numbers into the near future. I was also confronted with declining Mass attendance and budgetary issues, all exacerbated by the pandemic.

Many people have continued to ask me, "Bishop, are you planning on running a 'Renew My Church' in our diocese?" My answer has been consistent and constant: "Our parishes and schools will need to be looked at. However, before that, I need to get my own house in order." "My own house" refers to the diocesan offices and the Catholic Schools Office, which are housed in the Blanchette Catholic Center (BCC.)

To do so, I hired consultants known as The Reid Group. They are practicing Catholics who know and love the Church. They are also excellent at intensive listening, identifying issues and making recommendations to help dioceses change in order to thrive. Following their recommendations, we have streamlined the BCC's staffing from 99 to 70 employees and updated our organizational chart to reflect an approach that is outward-focused, effective and efficient. While this change has been successful in reducing our operating deficit and achieving a balanced budget, I am also keenly aware of the real-life impact of this process. Severance packages and an extremely healthy job market may have eased the transition for the affected individuals, yet this type of change is never easy. Please join me in my continuing prayers for the individuals impacted by the changes.

The Reid Group also recommended that after getting "my house in order," we should embark on a second phase to review diocesan parishes and schools. They emphasized that if we are going to ensure continued vitality in our diocese, then we would need to consider possible mergers, consolidations, or closures.

To begin this process, since July, I have gathered my senior staff at the BCC with the eight pastors who serve as deans – or leaders – of the eight deaneries – geographic regions – of the diocese. So far, we have met to listen to facts and trends, and have had discussions about potential parishes and schools that may need to merge, consolidate or close. At these initial meetings, I have been clear that I will NOT ask all our parishes and schools to participate in this process. Instead, we will focus on specific areas in the Diocese of Joliet to address specific situations. To reiterate, phase two will NOT be a diocesan-wide process. Instead, it will occur over the next two to three years in what I am calling a targeted restructuring.

Some people have already asked me -- some jokingly and some seriously -- if I already have a secret list in a vault in my office containing the names of the parishes and schools that will be affected. The answer to that question is an emphatic "No!" My senior staff and the deans will discern and collaborate to create a list of parishes and schools whose futures will need to be addressed in three stages: Urgent; in the next year; and in two to three years. When we have reached consensus on what parishes and schools will be affected by this targeted restructuring process, we will continue to share and publish the information through various channels, including our diocesan website.

Once specific parishes and schools are informed they will be engaged in targeted restructuring, they will begin a process of preparation, assessment and discernment before final decisions are made or changes implemented. Please know we are committed to actively listening to the voices of the pastors, principals, parishioners, parish employees and volunteers.

During these past two years, you have often heard me praise the Diocese of Joliet. We are a great diocese filled with amazing laity, religious and priests. We are experiencing so much success implementing my vision of catechesis, evangelization and faith into action. Why, then, am I leading us into this targeted restructuring? It is because most of us want to see a Church that is focused on the mission of Jesus Christ and not on the preservation of our buildings. As missionary disciples, we should all desire a Church that is thriving, growing and following the Gospel. In other words, everything we do as a Church needs to be about the salvation of souls.

At the end of the day, I do not want us to be viewed as a diocese that buried its head in the sand or kicked the can down the road. Instead, with deep faith in God, we need to prune some of the structural branches, so that our Church can continue to produce great fruit.

Soon, we will announce which parishes and schools in our diocese will participate in the urgent phase of the targeted restructuring process. We ask that you receive this news with an open, collaborative heart focused on the common good of our diocese. Please join me in praying for this process so that we all may seek and hear the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we begin this journey together.