

Office of the Bishop
Diocese of Antigonish
168 Hawthorne Street, P.O. Box 1330
Antigonish, NS B2G 2L7
Chancery 902-863-3335 / Fax 902-863-0037
Residence 902-863-1557

E-mail: bishopdunn@dioceseofantigonish.ca

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Dear Fathers and parishioners of the Glace Bay area,

I am writing to you as a follow-up to the Pastoral Planning discussions that have taken place in the Glace Bay Area over the past year or so. These discussions have as their goal to ensure that parishioners of the entire area get the pastoral care that they need for their spiritual lives. While this pastoral care is usually organized through parish communities gathered in a parish church, the reality experienced in many of our parishes makes us aware that we need some changes. We recognize numerous 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. Moreover, the Legal Settlement has added a new dimension to this discussion.

Over the past several months, other deaneries have been involved in this process and parishioners have experienced hurt, anger and sadness as we move toward implementing new arrangements. We need to address the reality of the resources available (priests, finances, buildings, parishioners' support, etc.) to ensure that our parishes will be sustainable and that resources are best used to support the larger pastoral mission of the Church. The recent workshop on Team Ministry is a reminder that collaboration must be the context for providing pastoral care to everyone and that all parishes need to make efforts to pool resources and collaborate in providing the pastoral programs needed for the spiritual growth of all.

Within the Glace Bay area, the population is decreasing and getting older and some of the eleven parishes struggle to meet the demands that are expected in a parish that must respond to all the needs. The goal for the restructuring of our resources is to express ourselves as more living and energized Catholic communities. The following is what I view as a sustainable parish, one where people will receive more and share more of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The discussions of the Pastoral Planning Committee were done with an understanding of a sustainable parish that is based on, but not limited to, the following considerations:

- one with sufficient population to ensure a celebration of the Eucharist that has all the ministries available, and renewed, so that the liturgy will nourish all present;
- one that recognizes that within rural parishes, the church is the very center of the community, and yet the parish must serve the spiritual growth of parishioners in a sustainable way;
- 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 proportionate 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.

Representatives from the Diocesan Pastoral Planning Committee met in November 2011 with representatives from the parishes in the Glace Bay area. At that gathering, the following information was presented: the financials for each parish in the area, the demographics of the area, and the age profile of the Diocesan Priests. We invited these parishes to make submissions to the committee as to how to address these issues. Over the next several months, the Pastoral Planning Committee received submissions from these parishes and also from individuals in the area. A proposal was circulated to these parishes in August 2012, with a request for further response. Submissions were made and, in November 2012, the Pastoral Planning Committee met with representatives of the parishes of St. Joseph's, Reserve, Immaculate Conception, Bridgeport, Holy Family, MacKay's Corner and Saint Eugene's, Dominion as well as from the parishes of Holy Cross, Glace Bay, Saint Anthony, Glace Bay, Saint Gregory, Donkin and St. Mary's, Port Morien. Further meetings were held with representatives of Saint Anthony's and Holy Cross in November and December, 2012.

The Pastoral Planning Committee reviewed all the information received, and after carefully considering all the responses, the Committee made recommendations to me and I have formulated these recommendations into the following plan.

## **Elements of the New Arrangement**

- 1. By April 2013, St. Anne Parish will also include all the parishioners from the former parish of Saint John the Baptist, Glace Bay as well as the present parish of St. Leo's, Glace Bay. Saint John the Baptist Parish has closed on November 3, 2012 and Saint Leo Parish will close on April 14, 2013.
- 2. The pastoral grouping that includes Saint Anthony's, Glace Bay, Holy Cross, Glace Bay, Saint Gregory's, Donkin and Saint Mary's, Port Morien will undergo the following changes, effective June 2013:
  - a. Saint Anthony's Church, Glace Bay will close and Holy Cross Church will be used as the church for parishioners from these two parishes;
  - b. Saint Gregory's, Donkin and Saint Mary's, Port Morien will remain open and will be served from Holy Cross Parish, with services scheduled on a rotating basis and will be monitored in light of the declining population of the area and the limited resources that might be present.

- 3. The pastoral grouping that includes Holy Family, MacKay's Corner, Saint Joseph's, Reserve, Saint Eugene's, Dominion and Immaculate Conception, Bridgeport will undergo the following changes:
  - a. Holy Family Parish, MacKay's Corner will close in June 2013;
  - b. Saint Eugene's Parish, Dominion will close in June 2014;
  - c. The sustainability of St. Joseph's, Reserve and Immaculate Conception, Bridgeport will be monitored in light of the declining population of the area and the limited resources that might be present.
- 4. Parishioners in all of these 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 in the Glace Bay area, we need to assist one another as we move through this period of transition, especially by collaborating with one another. The Pastoral Planning Committee is aware of the pain that parishioners experience when facing the merger of their parish or the closure of their beloved church building. As a result, the committee made only those recommendations that were considered necessary.

In the midst of all these changes, we need to recall that at the core of our faith we deeply desire to follow Jesus Christ within the Christian community. As people of faith, we believe that the Holy Spirit can lead 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 pain and makes our hearts burn within as we become renewed and excited about our faith; His presence fills us with hope and new life. In light of the experience of living our faith, we know the present number of churches cannot be sustained; thus, 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, especially with many people being involved in faith formation, in Renewal Movements such as Cursillo and the Youth Retreat Movement Challenge, and many 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. We 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,

+ Brian J. Dum

† Brian Joseph Dunn Bishop of Antigonish