Pastoral Advice on Parish Closures and Mergers in the African American Community

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Diocesan officials from across the country and pastors, parish staff members, and parishioners from the Archdiocese of Chicago offer pastoral advice for church closings and parish mergers in the African American community. The reality of parish closures and mergers is a summons to all parishes to examine their viability in carrying out the mission of Jesus Christ.

For more than fifteen years I have participated in discussions regarding parish viability and closures/mergers as a member of the advisory board for the Archdiocese of Chicago’s Office for Black Catholics and the planning and implementation committees for the Black Catholic Convocation, a gathering of 1,500 Black Catholics to decide on options for the future. In my work with parishes on strategic planning for their future, I was part of a team that helped a parish reach the decision to close their church and then decide on the criteria to choose a new parish. The following reflections come from these experiences and from interviews conducted with people who have gone through closures and mergers in the African American Catholic community. I look at the challenges of closure/merges for the bishops, the pastors, and the parishioners and provide pastoral advice for each

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from those interviewed. This advice centers around four issues: transparency, pastoral care of the adults, pastoral care of the youth, and parishioner participation in the process.

The Bishops’ Challenge

The closings of churches and the merger/consolidation/reconfiguration/restructuring of parishes have increased over the last ten years and will continue to do so. The reasons are many—outdated pastoral configurations, shifting and changing demographics, decreasing membership, diminished revenue, a shortage of priests, more churches than dioceses can afford to maintain, natural disasters, and/or aging congregations with little sacramental life. Dioceses are struggling with these realities and seeking to provide for the common good while trying to cause the least distress to the people of God.

Canon Law defines a church as, “a sacred building designated for divine worship to which the faithful have the right of entry for the exercise . . . of divine worship” (c. 1214) and a parish as “a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to . . . its proper pastor under the authority of the diocesan bishop” (c. 515.1). Given that authority and responsibility, the diocesan bishop is assigned certain tasks in the event the church must be closed. Canon 1222.1 states, “If a church cannot be used in any way for divine worship and there is no possibility of repairing it, the diocesan bishop can relegate it to profane (non-liturgical) . . . use.” Canon 1222.2 states, “Where other grave causes suggest that a church can no longer be used for divine worship, the diocesan bishop, after having heard the presbyteral council, can relegate it to profane . . . use with the consent of those who legitimately claim rights for themselves in the church and provided that the good of souls suffers no detriment thereby.”

Bishops across the country are facing complicated circumstances and making difficult choices to close churches. For example, churches in the dioceses of New Orleans and Galveston were destroyed by natural disasters, and the cost to repair them exceeded the insurance coverage by millions of dollars, money that the dioceses did not have. Other dioceses could no longer support the number of churches they had without facing grave financial difficulties in the future. The priest shortage has been a major factor for all the bishops. They are reconfiguring their dioceses for the good of the diocese as a whole, while trying to maintain a Catholic presence in all areas of their dioceses.

Many bishops recognize the difficulty and the delicate balance involved. Cardinal Sean O’Malley, archbishop of Boston, calls his decision to close Boston churches “the hardest thing I have ever had to do in 40 years of religious life” (USCCB November 2004, 385). He said he made it because “it is . . . a necessary reorgani-
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Bishop Hubbard of Albany, New York, said, “In terms of executive decision-making on my part, it is probably the most difficult thing I’ve had to do” (Catholic NewsUSA). He observed, “No one wants to close these buildings, but it’s a necessity in order to revitalize the church and continue to meet our goals in the 21st century” (Sanzone).

The question has been how to take these actions with the consent of the people while being attentive to their pastoral, emotional, and spiritual needs. Bishops are using various planning processes to gain input, participation, and consent from the communities of faith before making their decisions. The names given to these processes speak to the hope for the future of the church in the diocese: “Tomorrow’s Parish: Choosing Your Future” (Chicago, 1994); “Vibrant Parish Life” (Cleveland, 2002); “Embracing Our Faith—Envisioning Our Future” (Toledo, 2004); “Journey in Faith and Grace” (Buffalo, 2005); “Called to Holiness and Mission” (Scranton, 2007). Parishes were asked to assess themselves as part of the planning process. The assessments were then shared at the deanery/cluster levels and then presented to a diocesan planning committee or task force appointed by the bishop. Their recommendations were given to the bishop who presents them to the presbyteral council in accordance with canon 515.2.

Parish Viability Criteria

Out of these and other diocese’s planning processes have come criteria and excellent documents to help parishes conduct their assessments, determine their viability, and then plan for the future. The criteria for the assessments vary across the country, but the common threads for viability are summarized in this quote from Bishop Aquila of the Diocese of Fargo:

Once a parish is understood as “for the good of souls” and as “a community of the Christian faithful” in a particular relationship to the local diocese and the universal Church, the parish may be examined in light of its functions. The Catechism lists three parts of particular importance to a parish: 1) liturgy, 2) teaching, and 3) charity. “The parish initiates the Christian people into the ordinary expression of liturgical life: it gathers them together in this celebration; it teaches Christ’s saving doctrine; it practices the charity of the Lord in good works and brotherly love” (CCC, 2179). These three areas may be spoken of with various terms: liturgy, sacraments, worship, teaching, catechesis, faith formation, charity, community life, etc. These elements are at the heart of what it means to be a viable parish. (no. 15)

In addition, parishes are asked to look at the number of individuals and households registered in the parish; the number attending Mass on Sunday; the number of
baptisms, marriages, and funerals; the size of the church, its seating capacity, and potential for expansion; the condition of the building(s); and the distribution of parishes in their area. The dioceses of Cleveland and Scranton asked parishes to evaluate how they could collaborate with neighboring parishes, what they had in common, and in which areas of ministry could they work together to share resources and activities.

**African American Parish Context**

Canonist James Coriden has explained with regard to parish closures, “The conditions within the diocese, region and parish should be carefully and accurately reported, not exaggerated or concealed. Communication should be full, and the time for discussion and reflection ample” (Coriden, 105). However, while many dioceses explain the purpose of the planning process, they are not always clear about how the results will be used. Moreover, the general plan often does not take into account the particular historical and cultural context of African American parishes. In my interviews, participants drew attention to the need for both transparency and sensitivity to the realities of racism and injustice against the African American community.

Everyone I interviewed in the African American community spoke of the need for transparency on the part of the diocese. Many people interviewed felt that decisions had already been made and parishes were going through the assessment process to make it seem as though they had been consulted. They also felt that the criteria outlined were not the criteria used to make the closure/merger decisions, making the selection process seem unfair.

Great care needs to be taken when promises made early in the process by the diocese are not kept. The bishop should be ready to explain the reason for the change to the community. Otherwise the bishop and the diocesan representatives involved lose credibility. Also, full disclosure by the diocese to the pastor is needed so that the pastor and his pastoral staff can answer the congregation’s questions and address their concerns as truthfully as possible. While they may not be able to reveal everything they know, they can at least correct rumors and misconceptions.

Disclosure will also help the pastor and parishioners make good decisions for their faith community. For example, in one case, the closure/merger included a two-year planning process. However, parish representatives had no idea until the final months of the process that their planning would result in ten parishes becoming four (Cottrell). After reading the minutes of their meetings, I think if they had understood in the beginning that the financial figures indicated that only four parishes could be sustained, they would have been able to use all the subsequent information on buildings, ministries, etc., to make an informed and unrushed selection of the four (Archdiocese of Chicago).
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With regard to the history of racism and injustice, the diocese must be aware that the African American community may be suspicious of the diocese's intentions. Will their community bear the brunt of the closings? What is the diocese's commitment to African American parishes and to having a Catholic presence in Black communities? Where an Office for Black Catholic Ministries still exists, the director of the office should be involved in the diocesan planning process from beginning to end. “It must be extremely difficult for those who have never been inculturated into the African American culture or experienced inner city life to lead a planning process, make decisions, and make recommendations . . . for a people and culture they know very little about” (Keitzer).

The director can provide valuable insights for the planning process and with wording of documents so that they are not offensive to the community. The director can help the diocese understand how the community will be affected and how the diocese and its actions will be perceived (Daniels-Sykes). The director serves as a buffer and bridge between the diocese and the community. The community will often go first to the director with questions. Thus, the director needs to be fully informed by the diocese, so he or she can respond to the questions from the parish. Otherwise, the community will feel that the diocese has disrespected the director and, by extension, the community. Directors can help the community adjust to the changes and with the healing process (Gillie).

Pastoral Care Team

In terms of pastoral care, the presence of the bishop is important—whether in person or in writing—so people feel that he is involved in the process. Too often they only have the word of the pastor or diocesan official and think the bishop is disconnected. People need to understand that the decision was painful for the bishop, that he feels their pain, and that he is walking with them (Jones). For example, Scranton Bishop Martino sent a videotape explaining the future of each parish and expressing his respect and care for the people.

Those interviewed felt that a well-trained pastoral care team with experience in closures/mergers is needed to work with the pastors, staff, youth ministers, other ministry leaders, and parishioners from the announcement until all are well settled in their new places. People are grieving and need help. “The closing process is so painful that people want to get it over with and they end up skipping
essential steps. But as Church, we need to take people by the hand. They cannot do this by themselves” (Perry).

**Pastoral Care for Youth**

A group that is often overlooked in the parish closures is youth and children. I asked people, “What was done to help the youth through the closures/mergers?” They knew of nothing special. Often children only know what they’ve overheard from their parents and other adults, often with a tone of anger and resentment. They were sometimes part of protest marches (Gillie). Those involved in the closure process should plan special sessions with the children to explain what is happening in language they can understand. “Because they are children, they can take closing in a different way. . . . They should be handled with care” (C. Riley, 12). Closings are difficult for young people, especially if they have experienced more than one closing/merger (Adams). They have lost their schools and then their churches as one after another closes. In some instances they are now unable to get to church and CCD, since crossing gang boundaries and taking public transportation are not an option for safety reasons (Keitzer; Daniels-Sykes). Many become angry with the church and the bishop (Gillie). Healing and reconciliation services are needed for the youth, not just the adults.

The youth ministers should be informed and work together to help the young people to process what is happening effectively; to manage their sorrow, hurt, and anger; and to make the transition from one parish to another. The long-term effects on church attendance and vocations among African American youth should also be considered.

**The Pastors’ Challenge**

Pastors are affected by church closings and parish mergers, but receive no training for them. They often find themselves caught in the middle between the diocese and the congregation. On the one hand, they have to follow the directives of the diocese; on the other hand, they must comfort their people and deal with their questions, hurt, and anger. Parishioners, in their pain, might see the pastor as a collaborator with the diocese or as a villain. At the same time, pastors are expected to be mediators, reconcilers, peacemakers, and peacekeepers—all while controlling their own personal feelings. Their pain can be as deep as those of the parishioners. Some pastors see the closure/merger as a personal failure; others have been deeply wounded by the process and feel betrayed by the diocese.

Pastors and ministers who have gone through closure/mergers offer honest advice. First of all, “Don’t get into the blame game—Don’t blame yourself, the
diocese or the bishop” (Adams). Pastors need to be honest with themselves about how they handle conflict. They also must be honest about their ability to deal with the closing and/or merger in a healthy way for themselves and their parishioners. What is best for the people and the church in the long run?

There are many priests who have successfully come through closures/mergers. If willing, they should be assigned as mentors to pastors who are about to go through them. Experienced priests can help pastors deal with their personal feelings and be safe persons with whom they can frankly discuss their concerns and problems (Jones). An exiting pastor can be of great assistance to a new pastor in understanding the congregation.

In the midst of closures, particularly in African American communities, one dean advised pastors to emphasize the positive. Pastors should help the people realize the contributions they have made to the parish—how they have maintained buildings built for other ethnic groups; how much they have contributed through their time, talent, and treasure; how they have “responded with such generosity,” and “how faithful they have been” to their parish and faith over the years. The gifts Black people bring are “Christ’s gift too” (Jones). The story should be about how long they did make it. This can even play into how the closing of the parish is experienced: rituals for closures need not be funerals; they can be celebrations of life and the accomplishments of the parish. These frame the parish in its strengths, not in its weaknesses (Jones).

Likewise, thought should be given to leadership after the transition. Mergers can work well if the pastor is the same for both the closed church and the merged parish. In some situations, an interim “caretaker” priest may be needed to help the parish adjust to the changes, come together, and think through what is next. He can tell the bishop when the people are ready for a new pastor (Jones). This pastor can then be appointed when things have settled down and the parish is ready to move forward. In other instances, new leadership can be appointed immediately.

The Parishioners’ Challenge

Ministers involved in parish closures/mergers need to attend to parishioners throughout the process and beyond. As Coriden counsels, “Involve as many people as possible in the planning process. Meetings and consultations should be open, agendas announced, minutes taken and made available” (105). The key is to keep the parishioners informed: put the information in the bulletins, announce it from the pulpit, and mail it to their homes. “Let parishioners come up with solutions. Let the people own it. Let them see what the reality is, let them see the facts and figures. Let them digest the history and let them grieve through it all” (Perry).

There is grief even when the parish is willing to make the change. African American Catholics have strong ties to their faith community; the parish is “home.”
They have a strong, deeply rooted faith and spirituality. I interviewed one Black woman who had been through three church closings. She saw them as a test from God to see how strong her faith was. She advised people to “accept the closing, cry over the loss, feel the pain, and pray for healing so you can move on” (Spaulding). As Deacon Broussard observes, “Hard times require strong faith.”

Viewing the closure through the eyes of faith means that we recognize the closure is not just a business transaction. We often use too much business language and not enough theological language in times of closure/merger discussions (Gillie; Daniels-Sykes). We need to reflect theologically on where the paschal mystery is in this. When a parish closes there is death, but there is also resurrection. We ask, “How are we church in the midst of this?” (Cottrell). Deacon Broussard of New Orleans writes, “As Catholic Christians, we should embrace these mergers and closings, as difficult as they may be, as opportunities to spread the Gospel by the way we move through these times. . . .” The next question then becomes, “How are we to be church in the future?” (Gillie). The “Black Catholic community needs to stay strong (and) . . . focus on what will continue to make our church vibrant and viable” (C. Riley, 18). The challenge is to help people step out in faith, “committed to be church wherever you are” (Cottrell).

Follow-up with parishioners after the closure/merger is vital. Important questions to ask are: “How was the transition? Have you found a church home? Is there need for additional pastoral care with the grieving process?” (Adams). At one parish, the parishioners took it upon themselves to follow up with parishioners from the closed churches. Phone calls were made and letters of inquiry sent asking these same questions. They continued this outreach with bulletins and periodic notes for over three years (J. Riley).

The receiving parishes have recognized that they need to change as well. Parish customs, councils, ministries, committees, working relationships, and even worship styles all change. The new people have gifts to share. Making them feel welcome and working to build unity are key to long-term success. These can begin as soon as the announcement of the merger is made with meetings, prayer, and meals together. Ministry leaders can begin meetings with their counterparts at the closing church to work things out before the parishioners come (Krylowicz).

Healing, Hope, and Growth

Healing, hope, and new life can come out of closures/mergers. In New Orleans, “mergers that went well are taking off with new leadership. Dynamic parishes and really good things can come from mergers.” But, we have to help people “to see it and work for it.” They have to “understand who they are and what they are called to do” (Gillie). The Office for Black Catholic Ministries in New Orleans has just implemented a five-year evangelization plan for the community. In Buffalo,
New York, one of the African American parishes merged with another. They received a new pastor and a new name to give them a fresh start. While they struggled at first coming together, they are now doing well and growing. They are drawing African Americans from other parishes and are now home to a Nigerian community (DesRoses). In Chicago, a church made up of African Americans, Anglos, and Hispanics closed. They merged with another parish using the theme of a “marriage.” There was even a “bachelor party” at the closing church—the annual jazz concert in the park to which the entire community was invited (Krylowicz). The parish is currently doing well.

A Wake-up Call

Church closures and parish mergers should serve as a wake-up call to African American and all parish communities. Now is the time to be proactive. As Bishop Aquila explains, “Each parish must examine and question its organizational effectiveness in service to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the living out of our Catholic faith” (no. 11). Parishes should take the time to ask themselves: How does our parish measure up to the criteria for viability used by our diocese? How does our parish mentor and call forth the gifts of children, teens, and young adults? How serious are we about evangelization, including outreach to the nonpracticing Catholics and the unchurched?

Bishop Joseph Perry, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Chicago, challenged the African American parishes in his vicariate to begin working on evangelization. An Evangelization Intensive with speakers and workshops was held in fall 2007. Twenty parishes sent representatives. They were asked to develop an evangelization plan that was shared at the next meeting. Subsequent meeting assignments included planning activities for summer 2008 and Lent 2009. These efforts have resulted in new people coming to the churches with a renewed spirituality, hope, and enthusiasm in the parishes.

Pastors are realizing that they have to do things differently. They must lead, collaborate with, encourage, and support their parishioners in planning for the future. A group of pastors from African American parishes in Chicago developed this vision statement:

We . . . believe that it is possible to build up the Catholic presence in our community and that our churches can thrive in the African American Community. The present spiritual and ministerial challenge for the pastoral leaders of . . . each local community is how to help our . . . churches thrive. This will require not only pastors with a dedicated and skilled inner attitude and commitment, but also will be an ongoing challenge to ourselves to grow and prosper both ourselves and our communities. (South Side Pastors’ Vision Statement)
African American parishes must continue to exist, to recommit themselves to the mission of Jesus Christ, and to grow for the sake of future generations. “The future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping” (Gaudium et Spes, no. 31). What is your parish willing to do for the sake of future generations? Are you willing to work to grow or to merge, if necessary, so that there will be vibrant, viable parishes for future generations? We have come this far by faith. Let us step into the future with that same faith.

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