

Changes possible for archdiocese, parishes, schools

Vicar for planning seeks to 'energize vibrancy'

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“That’s the mission ...,” Fr. Connell said. “Go to all nations; we are to be taught what Christ taught us. As the church goes into the 21st century, we have to ask: ‘Are we really prepared well, as the people, to carry on that mission?’”

A management consultant during part of his 15-year career at the accounting firm of Peat, Marwick, Mitchell & Co. before beginning his studies for the priesthood, Fr. Connell is accustomed to asking questions. In July, he published and distributed to about 500 people a document titled “Energizing Our Vibrancy” in which he posed what he termed “starter questions” about the present and future of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

Single item agenda

For Fr. Connell, the questions he and others ask, and the information already elicited from surveys and consultations done in the archdiocese, will allow Archbishop Dolan to make decisions about the future of the church in southeastern Wisconsin.

“For sometime — three, four, five years, there has been a growing concern among the priests that we are not getting the planning job to where it needs to be,” said the 64-year-old priest. “We keep working at it, we keep talking about it, we had these new initiatives these last few years.”

When he was approached to be a candidate for moderator of the Archdiocesan Priests’ Council, Fr. Connell told the priests his sole agenda as moderator would be pastoral planning — to help the archbishop make decisions about the archdiocese.

“If you’re not willing for the priest council to have this as the top priority, don’t choose Jim Connell,” he told the priests. He was elected moderator in July.

He is also vice chancellor of the archdiocese, a judge in the metropolitan tribunal, member of the archdiocesan review board, pastor of Holy Name of Jesus and St. Clement parishes, Sheboygan, and supervising priest for St. Peter Claver, Sheboygan.

During Fr. Connell’s assignment as vicar for planning, Fr. John Radetski, pastor of St. Dominic, Sheboygan, and Fr. Roy Mateljan will tend to the pastoral needs of parishioners.

Why vibrancy isn’t evident

Expect Fr. Connell, who holds two doctorates in canon law, to ask questions as he formulates recommendations for Archbishop Dolan as to directions in which the archdiocese should be heading. Noting that the church in southeastern Wisconsin was built by immigrants in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Fr. Connell said Catholics today need to exhibit the “same energy and commitment to the mission of Christ as was there 150 years ago.”

“But just as they were willing to take the chances they needed about thinking differently as they came from different parts of Europe, so, too, we now have to be able to stand up and say it’s not a matter of our comfort level; it’s not a matter of what we used to do,” he said. “They couldn’t do it necessarily as they did it in Europe; they now had to mix with people of other places who did it differently, saw it differently, spoke it differently, and so we have to have that same type of attitude as we go forward.”

When Fr. Connell, a priest of 20 years, cites the loss of vibrancy in the church, he notes it’s caused by fewer people in church and fewer participating in the life of the church; few students in Catholic schools, fewer priests

and nuns, and buildings that continue to deteriorate.

“How can we look at all of this — it’s not just the priest shortage; it’s the vibrancy of the faith — to help put spark back into it to make sure that we develop the structure we need for the church in the 21st century, primarily focusing on the young people not the older people?”

Fr. Connell didn’t put a specific age on “young people,” but he talked about “looking to the future for the youth.”

“The younger people aren’t around that much; they’re the ones we’ve got to be finding and bringing back and getting attracted to this again,” he said about the evangelization component of his work. “The older folks, who have been very faithful and loyal, are going to say, ‘This is mine; this is the way we built it’ and yet, it’s not about them as much as it is about the younger people.”

Asking more questions

As he talked about providing the archbishop with a plan — “Ultimately, the archbishop decides,” he emphasized — Fr. Connell raised more questions.

“Demographic data might say Catholics are becoming fewer in parts of the archdiocese but not necessarily is the population is getting less. What role does the church have in evangelization? Do we need to make sure we have true parish presence in parts of the archdiocese where the Catholic population might be low, but we would see our mission responsibility of having a presence?” he said.

According to Fr. Connell, how the local church, i.e., the archdiocese and parishes, uses its facilities and human and financial resources might have to change, too, to be “distributed for the good of the whole mission, not just in terms of where we currently collect it.”

“This is a different model,” he said about the stewardship of resources.

Also different is the emphasis on “identifiable community” which will determine size and location of parishes.

“I do think we are headed toward fewer yet larger parishes. Some may see it driven from the practicality of fewer priests — there’s no doubt that’s a driving force,” he said, citing statistics that demonstrate approximately 20 percent of archdiocesan priests are under age 54, while 80 percent are over 54.

“Priest shortage is definitely going to be a factor, however, it is not the only and maybe shouldn’t be the major factor,” he said. “I say the more that people can be pulled together in the grouping of how they tend to live life — that’s that identifiable community.”

Fr. Connell said those groupings could be determined by where people live, shop, work, and send their children to school.

“We have more of an inroad to the vibrancy by being grouped in fewer yet larger organizational structures. Building wise, that’s a different question. But we’re not about buildings; we’re about people,” he said, noting that those larger parishes he envisions might have multiple church buildings and school buildings.

Fr. Connell admitted that this model of parish might not sit well with everyone.

“We’re at the point where this is not a matter of necessarily what people want in a popularity contest, because the ones who will vote are not necessarily the ones who will need,” he said. “The voters are the ones of the older group who are in church so to speak.”

Fr. Connell noted U.S. bishops realize that where they are headed structurally going into the future is not about those who are older, but about reaching younger people. He also acknowledged that the older Catholics who have been financially supportive of the church could use that support as an argument for maintaining the status quo.

“Our faith is not about finances,” he said, citing the Parable of the Rich Fool and Luke 18:25 regarding the difficulty a rich person will have entering the kingdom of God. “If people want to concentrate on their wealth, God love you. That’s not what we’re about; we’re about our faith.”

In recent years, members of parishes affected by declining membership and subject to mergers developed plans resulting in mergers or in the closure of parishes and the opening of a new one. Fr. Connell appreciates that process — as far as it goes.

“Where the people themselves, from the bottom up, have done as much as they can, but we cannot get the matters resolved, they have to be resolved,” he said. “That’s part of human life, part of business life, that eventually those in charge have to make decisions. We will be finding that the archbishop will have to make decisions where in the past they have been waiting for the people to make the decisions. So there will be a change.”

Archdiocesan school system

Calling Catholic schools “a tremendous service to the teaching mission of the church,” Fr. Connell is advocating an archdiocesan school system, a change from the parish-based school model.

“We live at a time when the financial resources needed to (maintain schools) are constantly growing. We find the competition for the resources with the other parish demands are draining other things that go on in the parish,” he said. “We close the schools that generally have financial problems, and they might actually be the schools we most need open, in terms of the mission of the church.”

Noting the schools’ role in helping the church fulfill its mission to educate, Fr. Connell suggested that a different model might be needed.

“By having more regional approaches to schools, we might better be furthering the mission of the schools and not just treating them as private schools,” he said. “All of the parishes should support all of the schools.”

That would result in “fewer, but perhaps bigger and better” schools, according to Fr. Connell, all supported by the pooled resources of the archdiocese and its parishes.

Stewardship in all areas

Personnel will be a concern for Fr. Connell as he examines what needs to be done by whom on parish, regional and archdiocesan levels.

“‘This is how we do it’ and ‘We’ve always done it this way’ do not appropriately approach the question because so much has changed, both concerning what is needed as well as who should be responsible,” he wrote in “Energizing Our Vibrancy.”

In the interview with your Catholic Herald, he noted, “(Personnel) need to be pulled together in such a way that they serve the people and the mission of the church.”

Fr. Connell is aware that new models for parishes, schools and use of personnel could require new models for financial stewardship.

“We need to revisit how we fund, how we pay,” he said. “And to truly stay within our limits.”

Fr. Connell said that the return of parish vibrancy might bring with it a better pool of volunteers which might lessen the amount of money the parish has to spend.

“As a pastor, I would be delighted to run a parish with all volunteers. We pay people simply because we have activities, functions that need to be done and we do not have competent volunteers willing to volunteer sufficiently to do that which needs to be done,” he said.

He will examine the potential of drawing volunteers from among the retired population, whose skills and wisdom he would welcome.

“I don’t know if we’ve given good effort to tapping human resources that might help us get the job done,” Fr. Connell said.

Decisions early in ‘08

In order for Archbishop Dolan to be able to make decisions about the future of the archdiocese, Fr. Connell plans to have a draft of a plan that includes answers to the theoretical and philosophical questions that have been raised, as well as a “vision of structures and organizational considerations.”

“So that by Thanksgiving, people in the pews are able to say, ‘This is what they’re thinking,’ “Fr. Connell said of the time table.

He will follow up by getting feedback and input on what has been proposed, and presenting it to the archbishop.

“In early 2008, the archbishop can say, ‘Here’s where we’re headed.’ Whatever is to take place by June 30, 2008 is going to need to be in the budget process in spring. If it is not attainable by June 30, 2008, then 2009,” he said.

From dreams to reality

Fr. Connell is adamant that change will need to occur.

“If we have to stick with the model as it was in the 19th and 20th century, we’re not going to be there. We’re going to shortchange our kids. So if the people want to say, ‘It’s ours, and it’s our money,’ this will come about without them if we can empower the young people to do this,” he said.

Fr. Connell expects people will be drawn to an opportunity to make that change happen, and he sees it as benefiting other efforts, e.g., the archbishop’s \$100 million capital campaign.

“There’s something now to invest in, there’s something to put our soul and heart in, not just our money, but our whole spirit, what we’re about, what our faith is. That can be there with some real vibrancy,” he said. “We have an opportunity to create that about which we’ve only been able to dream.”