

Two Town Hall meetings were held to explain and discuss the possibility of a merger between the parishes of Our Lady of Fatima and St. Helen's.

The following summarizes each meeting.

**Town Hall No. 1 at Our Lady of Fatima, Sunday, 9/19/10.**

**INTRODUCTION**

- + Earl Eichelberger welcomed everyone and gave some background on "Called to BE Church".
- + Earl stated that the focus of this meeting was "How are we going to do what we say we are going to do, as best we can?"
- + Father Bob and Deacon Dick gave an overview of how we have come to this point:
  - \* Pastoral Plan submitted to Bishop Hubbard on our website.
  - \* Bishop Hubbard asked us to continue present models of leadership, while "deepening linkages with a view toward merger."
  - \* Programs are being linked as two separate parishes doing things together.
  - \* Merger definition (legal) = two corporations becoming one corporation with a new name. (We submit three names to Bishop Hubbard, and he makes the final choice.) Each worship site can keep its own name, but the new entity will have one new name.
  - \* The new parish would comprise 625 families from OLF and ~1300 families from St. Helen's for a total of approximately 2000 families.
  - \* At least to begin, we would logistically need to maintain both worship sites.
  - \* At present, we are combining some ministries, and we have streamlined some staffing.
  - \* Finances: the merged entity will combine both assets and liabilities and have combined revenue of \$1.1 million. We have money in the bank and very little debt.
  - \* School:
    - The school, projected to operate in the black this year, would become the responsibility of the new parish.
    - Every parish contributes to a diocesan school regionalization fund, which is used to subsidize the schools.
  - \* Process from here into the future:
    - Implementation team to monitor, maintain forward momentum.
    - Where will we be 5, 10, 15 years in the future?
    - Pastoral Council working collaboratively to find areas for new linkage or merger.
    - Communications plan to keep all up to date and informed.
  - \* We need to make a recommendation to Bishop Hubbard concerning merger, but he will make ultimate decision.
    - From decision, implementation takes 12-18 months.

- + Father Bob: We are part of the mission of Jesus Christ and that must be paramount in what we recommend and in what we do.

**QUESTIONS (Q), ANSWERS (A), AND COMMENTS (C):**

- + C: Introductory explanation was more about a definitive decision than a discussion.
- + Q: Has it already been decided that we are going to merge?
  - A: No, but we have to look seriously at the possibility. We are required to make a recommendation. At the end of the planned linkages, we may be functionally merged anyway.
- + Q: In five years, will we be merged?
  - A: Probably, but if not, we will be much closer.
  - C: It will be a great idea (to merge)!
  - C: It sounds like Bishop Hubbard is telegraphing what he wants us to do.
  - C: A sense of fellowship is important, and we have it – it needs to be preserved as we become part of a larger family.
  - C: We need to make sure nothing special is lost.
  - C: Bishop Hubbard expects us to take a realistic look at resources available in the future.
- + Q: How many Masses can one priest say per day?
  - A: Canon law: Sunday: 2; emergency: 3. Cannot schedule more than three.
- + Q: Since other mergers have resulted in a closure/sale of a worship site, why do we think we can keep two sites?
  - A: Some cases of merger have kept two. Different circumstances in other cases. We are viable, and it would be healthy.
  - C: We should be careful to avoid a tax consequence of closing, but keeping possession of a building (tax-free if used; taxed if unused.)
- + Q: Where will OLF savings go?
  - A: All assets and liabilities will be combined.
- + Q: Will any money go to the diocese?
  - A: No.
  - C: (Deacon Dick): Old corporations will not disappear, but bequests will flow to the new corporation.
- + Q: Will each parish vote or will Bishop Hubbard just decide whether to dissolve the two corporations and form a new corporation?
  - A: There will not be any vote, but we can all have input into the recommendation. Only Bishop Hubbard can make the decision.
- + Q: Have parish memberships grown?
  - A: Yes.

C: We need two buildings for reasons of remaining accessible to all Catholics.

C: Didn't realize process continued after first phase.

+ Q: Is it necessary to look at merger and two sites if that is basically what we have now? Will process continue?

A: Yes, we will continue to deepen linkages. Bishop Hubbard wants us to continue model of leadership, but we may not have Parish Life Director available to us, depending on what new bishop does after Bishop Hubbard retires in October 2013.

+ Q: Will there be other possible mergers?

A: We may be in a position to welcome people from a closed parish in the future.

+ Q: Are we doing better than "viable", and what does "not viable" look like?

A: Dwindling numbers at Mass, low collection, unable to meet payroll.

o We are not suffering from these things, but we also need to consider vitality of our parishes and a merged parish.

o We have maintained or increased vitality.

C: I am on a St. Helen's committee, and this gives me an idea of how things need to work. It's important to see five years down the road where we are headed or what needs to be done to have things work smoothly.

C: Around the Albany Diocese, many women have been active in groups, and they wonder "What will happen to me?" We need to find a way to join people who are used to doing things a certain way.

C: Should be some encouragement for parishioners to visit the other parish, maybe once a month.

+ Q: Has having priests at Siena College help out to cover sacraments been considered?

A: We have less need now with four weekend Masses, and they have other responsibilities preventing them from being here regularly.

o The same is true for retired priests.

## **CONCLUSION**

\* We will have one shared bulletin by the end of this year, with sections for each parish as well as a common section.

C: Websites need to be updated to include each week's current bulletin.

\* Another set of Town Hall Meetings in the spring.

+ Q: When will directories be out?

A: Next couple of weeks.

## **Town Hall No. 2 at St. Helen's, Thursday, 9/23/10, 7:30 pm.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

- + Earl Eichelberger welcomed everyone and gave some background explanation of the purpose of our meeting.
- + Deacon Tom opened our meeting with a prayer.
- + Deacon Dick gave an overview of what merger might look like, after a brief review of how we arrived at this stage in the process.
  - o Bishop Hubbard: continue our Parish Life Director/Priest/Pastor model of leadership for now.
  - o Bishop Hubbard told us to “deepen linkages with a view toward merger.”
  - o We now share many ministries, and we remain two separate corporations.
  - o With a merger, a new corporation with a new name would be formed.
    - All assets and liabilities will be combined.
    - Any funds willed are left in a trust and would go to the new corporation/parish.
  - o We suggest three names to Bishop Hubbard; he chooses one.
  - o Size after merger would be 2000 families, which would put us into the upper tier of large parishes in diocese.
  - o Offertory would be over \$1 million per year.
  - o Finance committees, budgets, would be combined.
- + Father Bob:
  - o We would make worship-site decisions after merger, but using only one of the two would not make sense because OLF has more parking, but St. Helen's has a bigger church building.
  - o Liturgies would likely not change much.
    - Some things that are done differently, such as scheduling of altar servers would be worked out to make it the same.
  - o Administration and staffing will, over time, become more efficient with no overlap or duplication.
  - o Pastoral care and outreach would be greater with combined resources.
- + Deacon Dick:
  - o We have money in the bank and very little debt.
  - o It comes down to answering the question of how we fulfill the mission of Jesus Christ.
- + Father Bob:
  - o School would become the responsibility of combined parish.
  - o School enrollment is about 260, which is up substantially in the last two years.
  - o School projected to be in the black this year.

- + Deacon Dick:
  - o There is an Implementation Team to keep the linkage process moving forward.
  - o Parish Councils have recently held a joint meeting.
  - o Communications plan to keep all members of our parish families informed about the process and any developments.
- + Father Bob:
  - o Our recommendation for what to do is due to Bishop Hubbard June 2011. He will make the ultimate decision.

**QUESTIONS (Q), ANSWERS (A), AND COMMENTS (C):**

- + C: Obvious we are on road to merger.
- + Q: What is the plan to implement the actual merging?
  - A: Once decision is made to merge, it takes 12-18 months to complete it. Diocese has a manual to guide us in all aspects of making the merger happen.
- + Q: Are we doing all this even though we don't know yet whether we will merge?
  - A: We may become "functionally merged" if we continue on our linkage plan.
- + Q: I don't believe in fixing something that isn't broken. What is the rationale for even thinking about merger if both parishes are doing fine right now?
  - A: Our concern is what the future will look like: fewer Parish Life Directors, fewer priests, new bishop, declining church attendance, and aging of parishioners.
  - C: Economies of scale can be achieved without merger.
  - A: There is no guarantee that our very cooperative leadership model will continue – we could have new priest, no Parish Life Director, different deacons, etc.
  - C: New bishop may not make disruptive changes, even though he could.
- + Deacon Dick: A: Bishop declared that parishes will all be involved in cooperating, because no parish will be a stand-alone parish.
- + Deacon Tom: C: Isn't it better to make a recommendation to control our own future, than to leave it up to an unknown decision or outcome?
- + Q: Is it solely the bishop's decision?
  - A: Yes.
- + Q: What is the feeling at OLF about taking on the school?
  - A: OLF contributes \$33,000 per year into Albany Diocese's regionalization fund, so OLF is already involved. Being in the black vs. huge financial burden will avoid serious concerns among OLF parishioners.
- + Earl: A: I felt there was a receptiveness with regard to the school at OLF.
- + C: Make more info available at OLF with regard to Catholic schools and St. Helen's School.

+ Q: How many priests in the Albany Diocese? What is projection for ten years out?

A: Approximately 130 active, approximately 70 retired.

- Ten years: 45 priests with a steady number of Catholics (~400,000) and also declining number of younger parishioners
- The shortage will hit rural areas harder, so urban/suburban retired priests will be going there, which hurts us.

+ Q: Don't we train foreign priests in the U.S.?

A: Yes, but we are not seeing any increase because other countries have a much greater shortage than the U.S.

+ Q: Shouldn't we have women priests?

A: That is not something we control, nor can we count on it being changed anytime soon.

+ Q: How will we identify locations after the merger?

A: Location names don't have to change, although the new parish will have a new name.

+ Q: Is there any hope that the direction will change in this trend?

A: We are in better shape than many of other Christian denominations.

+ Sister Betsy: The real answer is Evangelization.

- Right now, young people are not fully participating in their Christian faith.
- If Evangelization efforts successfully share the message of the mission of Jesus Christ, it will attract greater participation, because it is a vibrant, attractive message.
- The Albany Diocese has just begun a three-year evangelization process.

C: Pope Benedict's message on his recent trip to England: "A nation must have some sort of religion to hold it together."

+ Q: Aren't many U.S. universities liberal in terms of not conveying sense of religious importance?

A: It is more of a church responsibility than that of the universities.

+ Father Bob: C: The most hopeful part of the process is when he invites someone to actually experience who we are and what we do – they like it and stay.

C: There is a war on religion and God going on and against the Catholic Church in particular.

+ Q: What is next step in this process?

A: Deadline is June 2011. We must make a decision in regard to what to recommend.

We will hold more Town Hall Meetings in the spring.