



## TO OUR PARISHIONERS AT OUR LADY OF FATIMA & ST. HELEN'S

### **WHAT WERE WE ASKED TO DO?**

The initial stage of the Called to BE Church in the Albany Diocese was a 27-month pastoral planning process introduced by Bishop Howard Hubbard in June 2006. Bishop Hubbard pointed out that, in view of changing demographics, aging congregations, declining revenue and lack of vocations, we are called to renew and revitalize the mission of our Diocese. He reminds us of our mission: *to proclaim Jesus Christ and his Good News of hope, healing, forgiveness and unconditional love to all we encounter AND to do so as servant leaders, with our presence, gracious hospitality, compassion and collaborative spirit as hallmarks of our ministry.* Our Bishop reaffirms that the parish is the center of the church's life as we plan for the next 20 years. However, he adds that no parish is a stand-alone entity, but rather must pursue its mission as part of the overall mission of the universal and diocesan church. In looking at how parishes are to be structured going forward, Bishop Hubbard underscores that it is the mission which needs to determine our structure and configurations – not vice versa.

We are grateful to our former pastors, Fr. Jupin and Fr. Kane, for their foresight in joining Our Lady of Fatima and St. Helen's as "cluster parishes" to begin to look at how we might collaborate to further Jesus' mission. So we had a head start as the Called To BE Church pastoral planning process began!

Over a period of 18 months, parishioners from both parishes met to formulate our pastoral plan to be submitted to the Bishop. We looked at: a) Reconfiguration (would our parishes be linked, merged or closed?); b) Mission (how will we collaborate to carry out the pastoral work of lifelong faith formation, prayer, worship and sacraments and Christian service?); and c) Ministry (how will we coordinate staffing to minimize or eliminate duplication?)

In June 2008, after extensive communication and input from parishioners, we recommended our pastoral plan to Bishop Hubbard. It called for continued linkage of our parishes, but with openness to merger. In January 2009, the Bishop announced his decision: that we would "continue our present leadership model and continue to deepen linkages with a view toward eventual merger."

### **WHERE HAVE WE BEEN?**

We have continued to deepen our parishes' linkage. A few of our linked areas include:

- Changing our Mass schedule as we have only one priest
- Combining our Easter *Triduum*
- Preaching in both parishes by Fr. Bob and Deacons Dick and Tom
- Lectors and Eucharistic Ministers serving on an inter-parish basis
- Choirs are combined for various liturgies



- Combined ministries:
  - Adult Faith Formation
  - Youth Ministry
  - Faith Formation K-5
  - Evangelization
- Our Pastoral Councils are beginning to meet jointly, our Social Justice Committees are collaborating more closely and our Pastoral Care ministries jointly are reaching out in new and innovative ways.
- Our Information Technology Team has met to identify areas in which together we can use technology to minimize expense and further the mission.
- Our Senior Group and CYO Basketball organizations are combined.
- We are looking at consolidating our Weekend Bulletins to reflect each parish as well as joint activities.

So, our linkage continues to deepen and we continue to move forward with a view toward merger. But what does it mean to merge?

### **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

From here, our first stop will be “Town Hall” meetings on **September 19<sup>th</sup> at 12:30pm at Our Lady of Fatima and September 23<sup>rd</sup> at 7:00 pm at St. Helen’s**. The goal of those meetings will be to discuss what merger would look like. Unless we know what a merger entails and its potential benefits and deficits, how can we determine if it is the right course for our communities? Already, parish committees have been working on what effect a merger might have on their area of ministry. We have asked them to review potential outcomes in the area of mission, membership, leadership and available resources. All those categories might be helpful for us to look at as parish communities as well.

Parish leadership will dig deeper into the meaning of merger from both a pastoral and administrative aspect. We will use the bulletin to continually update the community on what is going on and what we have learned. Then in the Spring, we will have another set of town hall meetings to discuss whether merger is a good and viable idea for our communities. Finally our hope is to make a recommendation to the diocese in June. It is always important to remember that all decisions rest ultimately with Bishop Hubbard and all we can do is follow his instruction to “continue to deepen linkage with a view toward merger.”

Following any decision to merge, the diocese urges completion of the merger between twelve and eighteen months.

*Fr. Bob & Deacon Dick*