

Closing/Merging Parishes and Inactive Catholics

People in different parts of the country have noted that when parishes close or merge, numbers of Catholics seem to become inactive. Do closings and mergers cause people to become inactive Catholics, or does the inactivity of a majority of Catholics in an area cause the closings and mergers? As in much of life, it probably cuts both ways.

Some of the driving forces behind closing and merging parishes are: changing patterns of where Catholics choose to live (away from the city to suburban areas); decline in the number of priests (as well as religious and brothers); the growth of less affluent multicultural Catholic populations; and decreases in Mass attendance, parish participation, and giving by the laity.

There is no way around the incredible pain that we are feeling about closings and mergers. We are going through the stages of death and grieving about our churches:

- **Denial:** Example - "our parish seems to be doing well"; "This can't be happening to us!"
- **Anger:** Example - "I'm so mad! Why us? Why our parish? It's not fair!" "NO! NO! How can this be happening?"
- **Bargaining:** Example - "Please leave my parish alone until I retire, move away, or die."; "I will do anything to keep our church open a few more years." "I will give everything I own if only..."
- **Depression:** Example - "I'm so sad, why should I try to do anything?"; "My parish is dying . . . What's the point of discussion and planning?"
- **Acceptance:** Example - "Everything is going to be OK."; "I can't fight it, I may as well prepare for it." "Maybe this is God's will for us."

Some of us may struggle for years trying to come to acceptance of our loss. For many of us our Catholic faith is closely tied to Jesus Christ and our parish church, and not so much with Jesus Christ and the Church (diocesan and universal).

Archdioceses and dioceses are offering parish leaders and parishioners some of the following ways to help us cope with our losses (not an inclusive list):

- One to two year local processes of discussing, assessing, and planning before parishes are closed or merged.
- Consolation Prayer Services with Rituals of Healing and Forgiveness.
- Regional or diocesan archiving of papers, pictures, and special symbols of the parishes being closed or merged.
- Inclusion of special symbols and artifacts of the closed and merged churches in reconfigured area parishes.

- Spiritual formation processes to help prepare people for continuing the mission of evangelization in our area.

In hindsight, we may be reaping the fruit of our own past "**inactivity**" in evangelizing. To be viable today, many Catholic parishes needed to start widespread and sustained Catholic evangelization efforts over 30 years ago. Pope Paul VI's *On Evangelization in the Modern World* (1975) called for this. Almost 20 years ago, Pope John Paul II called for this with *Mission of the Redeemer* (1990), and the American Catholic Bishops with *Go and Make Disciples* (1992). Individual bishops have written pastoral letters doing the same. Pope Benedict XVI keeps calling for this now (papal messages and "The Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization").

Two helpful resources:

Charles E. Zech and Robert J. Miller. *Listening to the People of God: Closing, Rebuilding, and Revitalizing Parishes*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008.

Beth Ann Gaede, ed. *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2002.

For use in small groups (5 mins.):

Read aloud the above paragraphs. Then gather in groups of 4-5 and answer the following questions.

Reflection and small group sharing questions (35 to 40 minutes):

1. Recall one of my most memorable experiences of our parish and our family's life there. What have I treasured most about our parish?
2. In what stage(s) of the grieving process (Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance) do we find ourselves today about our parish's closing or merging?
3. What resources do we have to help us cope with the grieving process? How can we find out what is available to us?
4. What is God saying to us through closings and mergers of parishes at this time? How will we prepare for an evangelizing future as parishes, dioceses and archdioceses?