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Archdiocese of Baltimore's Auxiliary Bishop Bruce Lewandowski speaks to an overflow crowd attending a special Seek the City To Come meeting for the Black Catholic community April 23, 2024, outside St. Frances Academy in Baltimore. The archdiocese released its final plan for parish planning in the city May 22. (OSV News /Catholic Review/Kevin Parks)

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The Archdiocese of Baltimore revealed the final plan May 22 for parish planning in Baltimore City, with 23 parishes at 30 worship sites, about half the current number of churches available for Sunday Mass.

Currently in Baltimore City and some nearby areas of Baltimore County that were part of the project, 61 parishes at 59 worship sites serve approximately 5,000 Catholics. They make up about 1% of the Catholics in the archdiocese, served by 44% of the parishes.

The Seek the City to Come initiative began in fall 2022 with listening sessions, followed by visioning, discernment and decisions. The archdiocese released a proposal in April that would have created 21 parishes at 26 worship sites, so the final map is an expansion of that plan.

"The whole orientation of Seek the City is toward the creation of parishes that are well positioned and well equipped to evangelize neighborhoods and to really gather the people in those neighborhoods, especially the unchurched, around the table of the Lord," said Archbishop William Lori.

He noted that the goal is to create "parishes that have what it takes to have a full range of pastoral services to do outreach, to do social ministry, and, if I may say, to be a light brightly visible in the neighborhoods where they exist."

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The archdiocese sought feedback on the proposal released in April at four public forums, which drew thousands of people, and the archbishop acknowledged that the interest at those events was beyond what most of the venues that were selected could hold. He said that was part of the "bottom-up, synodal process" of listening and responding. The final map makes that evident, since it is different from just five weeks earlier.

"People spoke passionately. People demonstrated their love for their parishes," the archbishop said. "But also, there were points made in those meetings that were very constructive and helpful in shaping the final map."

The Seek the City initiative included 20 months of effort by a working group of about 250 clergy and parish leaders from the city, with assistance from several departments at the Catholic Center. Seek the City leadership visited every parish site in the study area for an assessment of facilities and needs, and met with parish leadership for prayer and listening.

Open, prayerful discussions were held at points in the process, before the working group gathered to develop proposals that could be refined. The process also included data about the number of parishioners; the practice of sacraments such as baptisms, weddings and funerals; and other demographics.

Lori estimates that the archdiocese has heard some 6,000 voices in the process.

"We recognize that not everyone will be pleased with the outcome. But we truly have striven to listen. And listening has truly affected the outcome," he said.

Auxiliary Bishop Bruce Lewandowski, vicar for Baltimore City and co-director of Seek the City, said the initiative provided many and varied ways for people to be heard — in-person visits, parish visits, open public sessions, emails, letters and phone calls.

"The reality of it is, you know, at some point we have to stop and say I think we've got a good sense of what people are concerned about, what they're hoping for, what they might be worried and anxious about, what ideas and other possibilities that they have for the parishes."

The bishop said that input also will be helpful in the next phase of implementation.

Some worship sites were moved or added in the final plan.

Lewandowski said the overall plan has more parishes and worship sites than the proposal based on feedback and a closer look at the data. The goal was to have fewer, larger parishes spread out to ensure a presence in many neighborhoods across the city to renew the work of evangelization.

"We mean evangelization in the strict sense: forming missionary disciples and going out into the neighborhoods and bringing the Gospel," Lewandowski said. He said the

current configuration of parishes in the city spread the church too thin. "We wanted to strike a balance, because too few would not be a solution, either."

Lewandowski said implementation of the plan will be phased in, with archdiocesan offices providing support in human resources, clergy personnel, facilities, finance and the Office of Parish Renewal in the Institute for Evangelization. For most parishes, the new configurations and mergers will be done by the First Sunday of Advent 2024, Dec. 1. For others, it could be the first Sunday of Lent 2025, or even longer for some.

"What we've learned in other dioceses is it takes maybe three to five years for some people to settle into a new parish configuration. … There's going to be a great need for patience, flexibility, kindness, gentleness and compassion because it is a jolt to the system," he said.

The churches in the city that will no longer be worship sites for daily or Sunday Mass will remain available to parishioners for weddings, baptisms or funerals, at least until the newly formed parish decides how best to utilize all the properties.

"We want the new parish to be successful and financially strong, to be well resourced and so if any of the merging properties are sold, those funds go with the people to their new parish — according to canon law, it follows the territory and the people," Lewandowski said.

Lewandowski believes that in a few years, the church will be able to look back on this time and see new life, new growth, renewed mission and energy and a revitalized church. "We live in the hope of a new life to come."

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Lori said the initiative "aims to create bonds of cooperation and collaboration among the parishes themselves, to avoid a parochial competition and to foster in its place a sense of shared ministry, shared concern for our city and its environs, shared concern for those who live there and who are in need of the Lord and the faith."

That includes new forms of partnership with Catholic Charities, Catholic education and Catholic health care organizations, among others, especially those supported by the Annual Appeal for Catholic Ministries.

Geri Royale Bird, co-director of Seek the City, sees the process that got the archdiocese to this point as the keystone to collaboration moving forward. The listening, visioning, discerning and modeling sessions created an opportunity and a platform of working together and gave parish leaders a chance to work with people they had not known before.

"What's valuable is that all along we have been working together. Now we are going to put that to use even more," she said. "The excitement of this is that … we get to have a fresh start to have an evangelizing church now."

She understands some people will be anxious, but she hopes they "will look beyond that and know that there are brighter days because we're creating a landscape where we will have the resources … to really do the work."

Lori said, "We want to bring to bear upon the city of Baltimore and its environs all the gifts, all the ministries that the Holy Spirit."

Clergy assignments for the new parishes will be forthcoming.

For now, the new parishes will take on the name of the church where it is sited, but the parishioners of the newly formed entity can eventually petition to change that name. In such cases, usually the parishioners make suggestions, and the pastor can present three or four names to the archbishop for his final choice.