News



Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez is seen delivering the homily in a June 23, 2024, file photo. In a Jan. 5, 2025, pastoral letter, Archbishop Pérez unveiled a decade-long plan to counter declining numbers of faithful and active priests by creating at least 50 "missionary hubs" across the archdiocese to reach those distant and disengaged from the church. (OSV News/Sarah Webb, courtesy Archdiocese of Philadelphia)

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Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez of Philadelphia has announced a new initiative to open hearts, rather than shutter parishes, in countering declining numbers both of faithful and of active priests in an archdiocese he has long called home.

"I didn't come here to close parishes; I came here to build up the Church of Philadelphia," said the archbishop in a pastoral letter issued Jan. 5. It was announced during that weekend's Masses throughout the archdiocese.

Titled "An Invitation from Archbishop Pérez," the letter unveiled a decade-long plan to implement "missionary hubs" across the entire Archdiocese of Philadelphia. The archdiocese counts 214 parishes and 274 priests serving 1.55 million Catholics, and spans 2,165 square miles over five counties of the Philadelphia metropolitan area.

At least 50 such hubs, 10 per county in the archdiocese, are slated for "parishes and other locations," said the archbishop in his letter.

"We must be a community of Missionary Disciples focused on renewal, rebuilding trust, and inviting people to a relationship with Jesus Christ," he said.

The project seeks to engage "Catholics who don't participate and non-Catholics." It aims to create "a supportive network of missionary life across the whole Archdiocese, animating our communities everywhere, especially in underserved areas," said Pérez in his letter.

He explained the missionary hubs will have full-time staff, which may include "service coordinators, communications experts, event specialists and missionaries," working under pastors "committed to outward engagement."

An online FAQ page at the project's website, trustandhope.org, noted that missionary hubs will not replace parishes. They will be "primarily subsidized by private philanthropic funding secured over time and hopefully endowed for long-term sustainability."

Some 46 conversation sessions throughout the archdiocese have been scheduled from February through June. Catholics are invited to participate in discussions "that will shape our path together," said the archbishop on the initiative's website.

Pérez also said in his letter that the archdiocese "may introduce Parish Life Directors: deacons, men and women in consecrated life, or lay individuals to manage operations without a resident priest." These directors will work under the guidance of the auxiliary bishop assigned to the relevant region of the archdiocese.

Canon law, the Catholic Church's governing legal code, allows the Latin Church to establish parish life directors. Under Canon 517, the bishop can entrust the pastoral care of a parish "to a deacon, to another person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons." The bishop then appoints a priest "who, provided with the powers and faculties of a pastor, is to direct the pastoral care."

The strategy is similar to one commonly deployed throughout Africa, where the Catholic Church is seeing a fruitful evangelization. African parishes have multiple mission stations — often 20 or more — typically run by lay catechists under the pastor's supervision. Those mission stations, in turn, are made up of small groups called small Christian communities.

In his letter, Pérez said the new arrangement would allow "retired and senior priests to continue to care for souls in these communities and to offer the sacraments without bearing the responsibilities of administration."

In the past two years, 29 archdiocesan priests have retired, Kenneth Gavin, chief communications officer for the Philadelphia Archdiocese, told OSV News.

At the same time, "the statistic doesn't mean that they are inactive," Gavin said. "The overwhelming majority of retired priests are still actively serving the pastoral needs of multiple communities."

"We must prioritize resources and support for evangelization," Pérez said in his letter. "Investing in growth is critical, and harnessing the wisdom and energy of our retired priests in this way will be a gift to the Church of Philadelphia during this time of renewal."

Pérez said that renewal is crucially needed.

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"Today, 83% of our fellow baptized Catholics don't come to church. That fact needs to make us uncomfortable," he said. "We need to have urgency around this."

More broadly, he said Catholics must recognize that "we are living in times more like the earliest Christians — times when many are living without Christ." He said many Catholics have either "drifted away or been driven away."

Specifically, he pointed to social fragmentation despite technological hyperconnectedness, and the decades-long clerical abuse crisis.

"Yet, even amidst this suffering, hope persists," said Pérez. "Our hope is in the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ, who is always calling us home."

As a result, said the archbishop, "Our current task is to carry that hope to those who feel distant from the Church — those who may have slipped away or feel pushed away, angered and impacted by the abuse scandals, and those still seeking connection."

The pastoral letter reflects the archbishop's five years of conversations with Catholic faithful in an archdiocese he knows well: He was ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in 1989. He served there for some 23 years in several parishes and ministries before returning as archbishop in 2020, following assignments as auxiliary bishop in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York, and as bishop of Cleveland.

"As I have been out and about during these past five years, I've heard stories of interactions with the Archdiocese that have caused a strained and deteriorating relationship," he wrote in his letter. "These stories are from your friends, coworkers, neighbors, parents, or your children, and grandchildren. We can do better. I can do better."

Above all, said Pérez, "we need to inspire a pastoral change of heart that focuses on those who are absent and that aligns our collective efforts across parishes, schools, and charitable ministries to listen, rebuild trust, and invite people home."

Doing so requires Catholics to live out their baptismal call to become missionary disciples, he said.

"Many times, you may be the only person in a loved one's life who can reach them when they are feeling lost or disconnected. Your encounters can mark the beginning of their return," said the archbishop in his letter. "This is our shared mission: to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ's love, mercy, and resurrection to a world that desperately needs it."

Pérez said he was "not naive about the number of parishes we have and how we are spreading our priests thin." While he sought to avoid "widespread parish closures," some changes and closures would be inevitable. But he said to build up the church required forming people to be missionary disciples.

"Pastoral planning focusing solely on changing our current parish footprint will not cultivate that culture," he said.

Pérez said the new initiative has the goal of bringing about "a pastoral change of heart over the next twenty years."

He pointed to Pope Francis' description of the parish in the 2013 apostolic exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium" ("The Joy of the Gospel") as an institution that possesses "great flexibility" in sharing the Gospel.

He said, "My hope is that, through flexibility and an open heart, we can work creatively to meet the needs of our parishes and create more time for the Holy Spirit to inspire them."