

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 29, 2013 at 6:00am

Restructuring of Boston parishes enters Phase One

by Brian Roewe

For the last 150 years, St. Mary parish in downtown Lynn, Mass., has been part of the industrial community's long history, situated just blocks from city hall. Soon the old English church will turn the page to its next chapter as part of the inaugural wave of parish restructuring in the Boston archdiocese.

St. Mary was one of 28 parishes announced Jan. 10 as part of 12 collaboratives in the first phase of the archdiocese's pastoral plan, Disciples in Mission. The pastoral plan calls for all of Boston's 288 parishes to form a collaborative -- a grouping of one to four parishes led by one pastor, a pastoral team and shared finance and pastoral councils -- while maintaining each parish's identity and without closing churches. [See "Evangelization key to new pastoral plan in Boston" for more on Disciples in Mission.]

The entire plan will play out over the next five years with the hope that stronger parishes -- through shared resources and less financial strain -- will allow pastors and parishioners together to focus on evangelization, the force driving Disciples in Mission.

"All of us have our part to do, and this pastoral plan will help us greatly with our mission," wrote Fr. Brian Flynn, pastor at St. Mary church, in its Jan. 20 bulletin. His parish, where he has served for two and half years, will partner in the Lynn collaborative with nearby Sacred Heart church, just a mile and a half west along Lynn Common.

Several qualities of the two parishes made them appealing for the first phase, said Fr. Paul Soper, director of pastoral planning for the archdiocese: their collective Masses, which are offered in three languages, English, Haitian/Creole, and Congolese; and their schools, with Sacred Heart operating a strong, traditional, parish-based school, and St. Mary tied to independently run junior high and high schools.

"We're going to have some other collaboratives that have circumstances that are not dissimilar to that," Soper said, making Lynn a viable case study location.

The 12 collaboratives of Phase One represent a diverse geography of the archdiocese, with at least two collaboratives located within each of the archdiocese's five regions. Participation in Phase One was voluntary, left to priests to offer their parishes as testing grounds for the new plan. Flynn told *NCR* he nominated St. Mary in hope it would benefit from additional archdiocesan support as one of the case studies.

"I just think that it's an interesting challenge for us. It's challenging, but it's exciting," he said.

Determining who heads each collaborative becomes the next step in the pastoral plan. Upon inclusion into Phase One, each parish's priest submitted a letter of resignation, putting up for grabs who will actually lead the parish through the restructuring process.

"That didn't really faze me that much until I actually had to do the letter, you know, and then you realize that, hmm, come June when all the pieces start to fall into place, I may not be where I am now. I may be someplace else," Flynn said.

Open to all interested priests in archdiocese, pastor assignments will likely conclude by early April, with each announced as it is determined. At the Lynn collaborative, the new pastor could be Flynn; it could be Fr. Mark Derrane of Sacred Heart; or it could be someone else. Although a single priest will act as head, multiple priests will receive assignments to each collaborative. How many will be based on a variety of criteria, including a parish's sacramental load, but there's no set formula to equate the number.

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Through meetings with other parish collaboratives, Soper said a common concern among parishioners is who will be their priest, and there have been questions about parish identity. That such worries exist is not cause for alarm, he said. "I would be distressed if we weren't hearing the people were worried about losing their pastor."

Whoever ultimately heads the Lynn collaborative when it and the 11 others are formally inaugurated July 1 will take over two parishes that have seen Mass attendance slip slowly, with roughly 300 fewer in the pews in 2012 compared to a decade before. Aside from confirmation, those receiving sacraments -- baptism, communion, marriage -- have also dropped.

On the financial side, Sacred Heart saw losses exceeding \$64,000 in the fiscal year ending June 30, but the deficit lessens when paired with St. Mary, which turned an almost \$36,000 profit. Combined, the two parishes received an offertory of \$553,937, a planned byproduct in determining partnering parishes.

With pastors in place, the 12 collaboratives will begin to train priests in May, then begin to train pastoral teams, parish councils and school boards by September. The first wave of parish groupings is expected to begin its work in full by January 2015, equipped with a local pastoral plan formed by each group's pastoral team.

Keeping open the channels of communication among the archdiocese, the parish and its parishioners has helped avoid some of the surprises a restructuring can bring, as was the case in 2004, when the archdiocese announced parish and church closings without warning. Change is coming, but this time,

people are more aware of it.

In Lynn, 15 miles north of Boston, such change is no new development, as the former shoe manufacturing hub and home of a major General Electric plant shifts its economy as past businesses downsize and disappear. In recent years, more immigrants have settled there, and a growing LGBT community has aided its downtown revival.

The 150th anniversary celebration currently under way at St. Mary offers an opportunity for parishioners to reflect on its past, but also look ahead to what's next.

"We have a great past, and we're looking forward to a great future," Flynn said. "And that future may be a little different than we thought it was going to be, but it's still a great future."

[Brian Roewe is an *NCR* staff writer. His email address is broewe@ncronline.org.]

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