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Philadelphia archdiocese to close, merge 16 parishes

by Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans

Philadelphia — The Philadelphia archdiocese has decided to close 16 parishes, merging them with 13 nearby churches as part of a multi-year process assessing the long-term strength of every parish in the Delaware Valley.

As Catholics and others have moved to the outer suburbs of the five-county area, many, though not all, of the churches grappling with the current round of closures are in working-class urban enclaves and the older suburbs that surround the city.

Of the 46 congregations that participated in the planning process, 17 will be unchanged, leaving the archdiocese with 219 parishes, down from 266 in 2010.

The move to study and consolidate congregations in the face of shrinking attendance in some areas and shifting populations in others began four years ago and is expected to conclude by 2018, according to archdiocesan communications director Kenneth Gavin. "Eventually, every parish in the archdiocese will go through the process," he said.

Currently, five of the parishes are appealing the decision to Archbishop Charles Chaput, with the option of taking their case to the Vatican. No appeal has been successful since the mergers started, Gavin said.

Regardless of appeals, which can be long and expensive, the mergers will take place July 1.

Initial suggestions were formulated in conversations that took place among parish representatives and clergy meeting in local parish clusters, Gavin said. "It's important because these are the people most intimately involved in the day to day life [of the parish]," he added.

Gavin said while demographic factors like the number of baptisms, weddings and funerals are a

consideration in whether to close a church, other issues include the condition of the physical location, whether young people are moving into the area, and the availability of clergy to serve the congregations.

The parish clusters' recommendations are passed on to the archdiocesan strategic planning committee, then considered by consultants and, ultimately, by Chaput. "The process is really designed to be as collaborative as possible," Gavin said. "It's a sea change from the way it would have been addressed 20 or 30 years ago."

Charles Zech, who directs Villanova University's Center for Church Management and Business Ethics, agreed that there is no question that times have changed.

"This is long overdue," he said. " ... The archdiocese is in a terrible financial situation in part due to subsidizing parishes that can't support themselves. Frankly, that's not good stewardship."

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Chaput, Zech said, is the type of leader who is willing to make tough decisions. In doing so, he added, church leaders are addressing "a real mismatch between where the facilities are and where the people are." Both Gavin and Zech noted that in some city neighborhoods, parishes were built within blocks of one another.

While the archdiocese is not in the forefront of grappling with the changes affecting dioceses across the country, it is not the slowest, either, said Zech, who tags the priest shortage, fiscal challenges, suburban flight and aging infrastructure as a "perfect storm."

For the clergy slated to helm the emerging parishes, the process can bring a welter of administrative decisions, from molding eucharistic schedules (each merged parish will remain open as a worship site for a yet-undetermined time period) to choosing which office staff will remain and which may have to be let go.

"It's a very difficult process, a two-edged sword," said Fr. Mike Davis, pastor of the newly formed merger of Croydon's St. Thomas Aquinas Church and neighboring Elizabeth Ann Seton parish in neighboring Bensalem. The new parish will take the name St. Thomas Aquinas Church. Elizabeth Ann Seton is one of the five churches appealing the decision.

It is sometimes hard for parishioners in the parish being merged to see that their mission continues in a new faith community, Davis said. "I do believe that the common emotion is grief, felt most immediately by those whose church will not be maintained."

On the other hand, Davis said, the hope in merging the two parishes in the blue-collar communities is that a strong and sustainable community will emerge as the two communities build something new together. Aided by a transition team made up of members from both congregations, Davis will now begin the process of assessing every aspect of parish life.

"I don't think it's easy for any parish to close one and join up with another," said Susan Horger*, a member of the original St. Thomas Aquinas who serves on the transition team. "The positive part of it is that [we'll] have new ideas and new members, a whole new parish and a whole new way of doing things."

"This isn't easy," said Davis, who described the work of merging as physically and emotionally exhausting. "The real challenge is that everyone will really know that they are in the same position when

they begin to see changes."

South of St. Thomas Aquinas, in the working-class Delaware County suburb of Glenolden, Fr. Leo Oswald, pastor of St. George, is preparing to welcome parishioners from Holy Spirit Church in nearby Sharon Hill. (That church will remain open as a worship site.)

"You don't really know what to expect when you embark on a process like this," Oswald said, "but you know that there will be hurt feelings and disappointments. It's difficult to prepare people for that."

While parishioners from the church being merged may fear that their church is simply being absorbed into the other parish, Oswald said, "This is a whole new community. ... St. George has to evolve and change and become new."

One example of the "grunt work" involved is making sure that all registers from both parishes' schools (now closed) are kept securely stored in perpetuity, Oswald said.

"One of the challenges is helping people deal with their grief in a way that brings it to resurrection," he added.

Asked how long that would take, he answered "Literally: God knows."

From the vantage point of his South Philadelphia parish that has been home to generations of Philadelphia newcomers, also called St. Thomas Aquinas, Msgr. Hugh Shields saw the mergers as a wake-up call for his own church. Although St. Thomas Aquinas isn't slated for merger, Shields is concerned about the financial difficulties his parish, which has a vibrant ministry of education, hospitality and support for immigrant communities, may face as it copes with aging buildings, rising personnel costs, and the ongoing need for a denomination rooted in an Eurocentric cultural perspective to adjust to changing demographics.

"If it just hinged on finances, we'd be an endangered species," Shields said. Anticipating that eventually his congregation will be asked to do the hard work of self-evaluation, Shields is encouraging parishioners to intensify their commitment to "time, talent and treasure" now.

**An earlier version of this story misspelled Horger's last name.*

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