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Diocesan reconfigurations in a rapidly changing church

Tom Gallagher | Jun. 23, 2009 NCR Today

This story about parish closings and openings is quite interesting, especially given the number of states with net closures. It's well beyond just the Northeast. The story has a good graphic/map [1].

On the positive side, one expert observer notes:

> "Even as the frequency of parish suppressions and mergers increases, the Catholic church in America remains strong," said Marti Jewell, the outgoing director of the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership, a 6-year-old collaborative effort between six national organizations studying the changing structure of parishes.
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> The organizations include National Association for Lay Ministry, Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development, National Association for Church Personnel Administrators, National Association of Diaconate Directors, National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association and National Federation of Priests Councils.
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> Jewell called the current trend that is emerging -- fewer parishes, fewer priests and greater involvement of lay leaders -- "the most amazing paradigm shift" in the history of the U.S. Catholic Church. She said the shift is a natural evolution four decades after the Second Vatican Council.
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> "I think that what we're being asked to do is to redefine our understanding of what a parish is," she explained. "We know canonically what it is and I'm not talking about that. But what a parish does and who does it in a parish, I think we're going to have to re-look at that. I think the spirit is inviting us deeply to seeing the parish as a community of disciples whose task is to evangelize the mission in the world. ?We are where we are," Jewell said. "There is no going back."

It's surprising that Marti Jewell shys away from the Code of Canon Law which places all civil and canonical law into the hands of the pastor. This paradigm sets the framework for the priest-lay parishioners relationship. This creates an imbalanced relationship and certainly not one modeled after the Holy Trinity, as an appropriate model of engagement, co-responsibility and collegiality. Theologian Dr. Paul Lakeland has made this point in his writings.

What Marti Jewell does not point out is the substantial attrition or loss of Catholics in the U.S. (1 in 3 Americans is a former Catholic or 30 million, according the a recent Pew study [2]), the historically low weekly Mass attendance, the rising percentage of Americans who believe in God, but don't belong to a specific denomination, and of course, the U.S. Catholic-population-saving infusion of immigrants into the U.S. church. This data clearly raises the "relevancy question," i.e., how relevant is the Catholic faith to lay people? Is it sufficient as a church to simply chase demographic trends and conclude that our church is strong and vital?

My award-winning *NCR* colleague, Tom Roberts, has been on the road In Search of the Emerging Church [3]. His series is worth reading.

Marti Jewell is correct when she says, "I think the spirit is inviting us deeply to seeing the parish as a community of disciples whose task is to evangelize the mission in the world. We are where we are. There's no going back."

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