

RESOURCES FOR MERGING PARISHES [as adopted in Madison, Wisconsin]

The process of merging parishes provides many opportunities to grow in faith, to increase in love and acceptance and to be imbued with hope. While the merger process can lead to a real renewal of faith for parishioners, there are many losses along the way. The losses must be grieved through a process of remembering and renewing before new grace-filled energy is realized and a new parish community can be created.

Forming the Merger Committee. A merger committee is made up of five people including the pastor(s) from each parish that is being merged. This committee acts like a “steering” committee assisting the pastor(s) in the process, taking on some of the merger responsibilities and acting in a leadership role in the process. The merger committee helps ensure effective and sustained communication throughout the process. The merger committee works with the pastor(s) to accomplish the following: to assist in providing for the pastoral needs of the parishioners during this time of transition to assist with the tasks which need to be accomplished that are described in the documents which follow to ensure the smooth transition of several parishes to one new parish community to be proactive in inviting parishioners to remember their past, hold it sacred, ritualize the gifts given to the parish and plant new seeds for the future to be a sounding board and an inspiration during the merger process to help in forming a new parish pastoral council

Merger Committee Meetings. It is recommended that the merger committee choose a chair and a secretary. The chair’s job is to facilitate the meetings, work with the pastor(s) to put together an agenda and ensure follow-up to decisions made at the meeting. The secretary is charged with keeping minutes and following up with any written reports that need to be made during the merger process. It is recommended that at the beginning of the process the merger committee meets every other week to lay out the tasks and calendar the process. The meetings should not be more than two hours. The merger committee should be familiar with the following areas which need to be addressed in the merger process: canonical, corporate, pastoral, such as celebrating the past, renewing the present and planting seeds for the future, human resource issues, cemetery issues and items such as how to form a new parish pastoral council. It is recommended to have some common town hall meetings during the process. This is one way to keep parishioners informed, help them get to know one another and provide an opportunity for prayer and reflection. Trained facilitators are available to help with town hall meetings.

Dealing with Change. The “in between time,” when you are experiencing the ending of what was and waiting for what will be, is a “wilderness” zone. There are many ups and downs in the wilderness. Unpredictability is a word that often describes these months. People take several steps forward and fall back a few. Over a period of time with renewed energy new beginnings do happen and more stability follows.

Focus on the Parishioners. Do not put all your energy as a merger committee on the “tasks and checklists.” A lot of attention needs to be given to the parishioners and their feelings and needs. Many may be experiencing a great deal of loss. Things will not be the same. Their parents and grandparents, and perhaps great grandparents, have built the parishes that are merging. They need to be remembered and celebrated. Storytelling, rituals and times for the parishioners from the merging parishes to gather to get to know each other, pray and enjoy social events are critical during the merger process. There are rituals included in this section for your consideration. They are “starter” ideas and need to be adapted to your situation.

Special Invitations. As the time gets closer to the actual merger, people need to be formally invited to join the new parish. Personal contact should be made so all know they are welcome and needed for a vibrant new parish. If people have not “registered” for the new parish they should receive a pastoral visit to help them know how important they are and how much the new parish wants them to be a member. In some cases people will join parishes other than the one that is part of the merger process for convenience or personal reasons. This is fine as long as they know they are welcome at the newly merged parish. The personal contact will make all the difference in the world. To effectively merge parishes we need to honor the past and cherish the memories of it, name the present strengths and struggles, recognize the losses and hurts and generate hopes and dreams for the future. All this is part of living out the “life-death-resurrection” mystery as disciples of Jesus Christ. Our faith will support us in this journey as the Spirit of the Risen Christ is ever present to us. Gather parish councils for at least one joint meeting to plan for merger. Pastor(s) and finance and pastoral council chairs of the parishes about to be merged. As the councils are gathered explain that the work of the council will be done by a merger committee (if the merger will occur within a year) for the first year of the merged parish. If the merger is

more than one year away, the council is chosen in the manner of the common pastoral council for linked parishes. Choose representatives or ask for volunteers to serve on the merger committee as well as members to serve the various committees needed during the transition. Some are named below. Pastor(s) of current parishes about to be merged. Form a subcommittee to address transition, grief and loss issues using The Reid Group and/or Parish Facilitators to assist in addressing the issues.

HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS REGARDING PARISH MERGERS

The merging of a parish can have a strong impact on the parishioners in a community. The ties that bind people to their parish are well established and in many cases of long standing. It is not easy to let go of the past. A strong emotional attachment, often rooted in familiar historical events, can create a pattern of grieving not unlike the passing on of a loved one. For the employees of a parish faced with merger, the effect is also one of career and financial uncertainty. If two parishes merge into one, employees doing similar work in each parish know that their jobs are at risk because the new parish simply cannot afford duplication in most positions. As the Church, we have a responsibility to our employees to assist them in their transitions caused by parish mergers. The Synod of Bishops document Justice in the World (1971) stated, "All the moral principles that govern the just operation of any economic endeavor apply to the church and its agencies and institutions: indeed the Church should be exemplary." Just as we would expect a business in our community to tend to the needs of its employees during lay-offs, so must we make provisions to assist our staff who lose their jobs. While employees should expect assistance from their parishes during these transitions, they must also be cognizant of the financial situation facing many parishes today. Unrealistic expectations will lead to anger that will further hurt the parish community at a time of anxiety. A measure of cooperation between the parish and the staff should exist with the goal being one of understanding.

FORMING A NEW PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL AND APPOINTING TRUSTEES

A New Parish Pastoral Council for Merging Parishes. A new parish council represents a newly formed parish. This does not mean that former council members cannot be part of the new council. The following suggestions are offered as a way to begin. Have representatives from each parish. If three parishes merge, it is wise to have three to four members from each parish. If two parishes merge, consider five from each parish. Terms should be staggered so that members are gradually rotated off the council. For at least the first six months, spend time helping council members get to know each other so that they can function more effectively. Consider a half day retreat where council members become better acquainted and have an opportunity to pray and share faith together. Initially spend time on developing a mission, values and vision statement for the new parish as derived from the Diocesan Mission, Values and Vision. See Section 5 #2 for ideas and processes. Be sure the parish is involved in these processes. They provide a wonderful opportunity to develop a cohesive parish spirit and sense of community. See Section 5 # 1 of the Implementation Guide for reflection on how to prepare and run successful meetings. While the focus is on common councils many of the ideas should be adapted to the newly merged parish.

New Trustees. Because the new parish is a new corporation, the pastor has the right to appoint the new trustees. Generally, if two parishes merge, pastors will choose one trustee from each parish.