

Evaluation for Possible Closure of a “Mission” Church

Pope Francis states in paragraph thirty-three of *Evangelii Gaudium* “Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: “We have always done it this way.” I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities. A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory. I encourage everyone to apply the guidelines found in this document generously and courageously, without inhibitions or fear. The important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment.”

For some time the Diocese of Cheyenne has experienced challenges in small parish churches, known to us as “missions.” These challenges are due primarily to declining demographics and adverse economics. Having been asked by several pastors to seek a solution, Bishop Etienne brought the issue before the Presbyteral Council on March 29, 2012.

The Presbyteral Council recommended an evaluation of our “mission” churches. The Presbyteral Council developed an instrument which was sent to each pastor responsible for one or more “mission” churches. The questions covered changes in Sunday Liturgy attendance, Faith Formation, Evangelization, works of charity, financial stability and the effects upon the pastor serving these outlying churches. The evaluation was completed in 2012.

At the recommendation of the pastors, a process was developed by the Presbyteral Council to consider the viability of these “mission” churches. We now seek to set clear guidance regarding the criteria of a vibrant “mission”: ownership and participation, faith formation for all ages, works of charity, evangelization and meeting financial obligations (See appendix A).

The decision to close a particular church can be difficult for communities to accept. It is the loss of their spiritual home; the place where they encountered God in worship, celebrated the Sacraments, proclaimed God’s Word, exercised charity, and found comfort in times of difficulty. In order to assist these communities, the following process is to be followed:

1. When a pastor or the community itself has serious concern regarding the vibrancy of the life of the faith community and thus potential reason(s) for the church to be closed the community is to be informed. This must be a part of both Parish Pastoral and Finance Council agendas of the mother Parish and mission, clearly recorded in the minutes of both entities.
2. Share the basic information gleaned from the Pastor’s report of 2012 and the specific information gathered in accordance with appendix A via the bulletin, letter to each household, website, and announcement at Sunday liturgies.
3. The Pastor will call for a “town hall” meeting, where the issues of viability will be discussed openly and honestly. The decision for a “town hall” meeting is to be reflected in the minutes

of both the Pastoral and Finance Council. There should be an announcement about the meeting each week for a two week period prior to the meeting. The “town hall” meeting needs to meet the following goals:

- a. Affirm feelings
 - b. Seek understanding of the parishioners
 - c. State clearly the criteria for reaching a decision of closure
4. If there is a clear desire and commitment of the community to stay open, parishioners and parish leadership need to begin stating concretely what will be done to sustain the mission in the areas of faith formation for all ages, evangelization, works of charity, financial responsibilities, etc.
 5. Action by Presbyteral Council if the community is not in favor of keeping the mission open or judge they are unable to live the necessary commitments to keep it vital.
 6. After the “town hall” meeting, offer a listening session with the Bishop or Vicar General at a time the majority of the community can gather. This listening session needs to meet the following goals:
 - a. Affirm feelings
 - b. Seek understanding of the parishioners
 - c. State clearly the criteria for reaching a decision of closure
 7. If there is a clear desire and commitment of the community to stay open, give the parishioners and parish leadership twelve months to show they are seriously interested in and committed to keeping the “mission” open. What concretely will be done to sustain the mission: faith formation for all ages, evangelization, works of charity, financial responsibilities, etc? The stated commitments are to be recorded in the minutes of both the Parish Pastoral and Finance Council minutes.
 8. At the end of the year, if expectations have not been met:
 - a. inform the community via bulletin, announcements, website, letter to each household
 - b. the Bishop will bring the question of closure to the Presbyteral Council
 - c. schedule an official closing date,
 - d. schedule final liturgy, reception, etc.
 9. Goals of the final liturgy need to:
 - a. Affirm the history of the people, the contributions and sacrifices made for and by the current community.
 - b. Celebrate the present reality, thanking God for His faithfulness and generosity.
 - c. Celebrate the future of those present, entrusting their pastoral care to the main parish community.
 10. The Sunday following the closure, the main parish community needs to celebrate and receive the new members who have now joined them for Sunday liturgy and other parish functions, formally recognizing and welcoming them.

Canonical concerns:

1. There must be grave cause for reducing a church to a profane state
2. The cause must be presented to the Presbyteral Council
3. The Presbyteral Council must make a recommendation to the bishop
4. A Decree must be issued and must specify the right to recourse
5. If there is to be alienation of property
 - a. There must be a serious reason
 - b. If the property is valued at more than \$25,000.00 the Diocesan Finance Council and College of Consultors must be informed and consent given
 - c. If Sacramental records were kept they must be transferred
 - d. If there are financial resources they must be transferred
 - e. If civilly incorporated there must be a dissolution of the corporation
6. Final sale of property and distribution /assignment of assets
 - a. Property / buildings
 - b. Religious art and vessels

Appendix A

Checklist regarding the criteria for a vibrant “mission.”

Evangelization:

- _____ A sense of community is actively built by the active members.
- _____ Efforts are made by members to bring the gospel message to those who have ceased practicing their faith.
- _____ Efforts are made by members to bring the gospel message to those who do not profess the faith.
- _____ Promotes and supports missionary endeavors.
- _____ Speaks out about moral principles, even about societal issues, concerning human affairs insofar as the fundamental rights of the human person or the salvation of souls requires.
- _____ Assists the individual member to fulfill their duty with regard to evangelization.

Faith Formation

- _____ Faith formation is available to all ages.
- _____ Calls forth and prepares Catechists, providing them all necessary material to fulfill their ministry.
- _____ Sacramental preparation is available.
- _____ Fosters a sense that catechesis is a task which involves everyone and is for everyone.

Liturgical Actions

- _____ Provides for participation of the faithful in the various liturgical ministries.
- _____ Celebrates liturgical actions with the presence and active participation of the Christian faithful.
- _____ Prepares parents and sponsors of an infant who is to be baptized.
- _____ Uses the R.C.I.A. for adults and those children of appropriate age seeking baptism.
- _____ Properly prepares and instructs those who are seeking the Sacrament of Penance.
- _____ Properly prepares and instructs those who are seeking the Sacrament of Eucharist.

- _____ Properly prepares and instructs those who are seeking the Sacrament of Confirmation.
- _____ The faithful gather frequently for Eucharist and Penance.
- _____ Properly prepares and instructs those who are seeking the Sacrament of Matrimony.
- _____ Actively supports those couples living a sacramental marriage.
- _____ Actively supports and seeks to validate those marriages that are currently civil unions.
- _____ Provides funeral rites for deceased members and catechumens.

Personal Holiness

- _____ Assists members to lead holy lives.
- _____ Leads the faithful to practice charity.
- _____ Diligently seeks out the poor, afflicted, lonely and those with special difficulties
- _____ All the Christian faithful bear responsibility for the social mission of the church.

Financial Stability

- _____ Prepares an annual budget.
- _____ Is able to pay liability/property insurance.
- _____ Is able to pay utility bills.
- _____ Is able to pay for necessities; liturgical needs (hosts, wine, etc.), catechetical materials, evangelization materials and charity

The Source for Appendix A is found in the following document:

Canonical Standards for Parishes; A Self-Evaluation Instrument
Canon Law Society of America, 2002