

M

y dear friends,

This fall we will be embarking on a planning process called “Our Faith, Our Future: A Plan for the Diocese of Grand Rapids.” It is a process that will not be accomplished all at once but over a period of 2 – 3 years. In light of my own observations over these past four years along with input and recommendation from many others, it is clear that now is the time.



➤ Bishop Hurley is joined by members of the St. Alphonsus Youth Choir during Catholic Charities West Michigan's (CCWM) Let's Go to Bat for Kids! on June 24. The event at Fifth Third Ballpark drew nearly 2,000 people who gathered to see the Media Giants take on the CCWM Padres in a light-hearted softball game to benefit CCWM's child abuse prevention services and family preservation programs. Nearly \$30,000 was raised.

The Catholic Church of the Diocese of Grand Rapids has a rich history of serving our Catholic and other populations throughout the years. The diocese comprises 11 counties and more than 1.2 million people. Presently the diocese has 103 parishes/missions, 29 elementary schools, 4 Catholic high schools, and several preschools. Fulfilling the Church's mission faces new challenges precipitated by changes such as declining or growing populations, shifting cultural attitudes, a new generation of Catholics in the Church, growth of the Hispanic community, and fewer clergy. A strategic pastoral plan is needed to establish a well-defined direction for future decisions and to facilitate change that leads toward a stronger, more vibrant Church.

Some of the key issues facing the parishes and schools are:

- Fewer priests with increased demands for their service and leadership
- Finances that are stretched and sometimes inadequate to sustain a full range of ministry or fund quality Catholic schools
- Aging physical facilities with deferred maintenance or looming capital costs
- Challenge of sustaining the one parish/one school model
- Shifts in demographics and values among the wider Catholic population

For the Church in the Diocese of Grand Rapids to realize its goals, it must strategically follow a clear direction over many years toward a vision that is widely understood and embraced. Pastoral planning will build upon the strengths of parishes and Catholic schools and address fundamental issues that have a long-term impact on their vitality and vibrancy. It will also address many long-range strategic questions at the local level, deanery level and diocesan level. The benefits to the parishes, schools and the diocese are:

- A fresh discussion, awareness and common understanding of parish and school vitality
- Objective data researched and presented to understand the challenges facing the Church in the Diocese of Grand Rapids and examine options for the future
- Involvement of clergy, laity and key decision-makers in the planning process

- Good stewardship of finances, facilities, personnel and other resources
- Consensus support for a realistic plan to minister to the current and future population
- Plan to sustain and enhance the viability of Catholic schools
- Parishes and schools working together toward a common vision
- Greater potential for successful implementation because ownership for the plan was cultivated through the process

It is important to note that the strategic pastoral plan is not a problem-solving process for individual parishes or schools; but rather, is a systemic approach to planning. It will be focused on the basic organization and structures that provide parishes and schools the opportunity to grow and thrive in their mission.

It will be critical that key stakeholders in the diocese have opportunities for input as plans are being developed. Consultation and discussion will take place at the deanery level, the diocesan level, and, when needed, at the local level. By bringing decision-makers into the process, the plan will be built on prayerful reflection, best thinking, solid rationale, and a long-range view of the diocese as a whole. Persons and groups to be involved are being identified early in the planning process.

I ask your prayers as we move forward with “Our Faith, Our Future.”

Blessings to all this summer season,
Bishop Walter A. Hurley