

**Editor's notes:** The following are questions asked at the informal townhall-style Q&A gathering at Saint Mark parish on Saturday, September 23, 2023. Questions were offered by about 60 parishioners to Father Maurer, who answered them to the best of his ability. Parishioners are encouraged to consult official archdiocesan documentation at <https://www.archseattle.org/partners> and the dedicated page on the parish website <https://www.saintmarkshoreline.org/partners>

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### **What are the main catalysts that got us here?**

So the primary things are a lack of priests and a projected lack of priests. Currently, we have over 100 priests but you'll see in the documents that were projected in about 10 years to have something like, 67, or 70 pastors.

Who can be pastors? Not every priest can be a pastor - some of them are from religious communities that are on loan, some are from overseas and are only here for a period of time, and a very small number - but still a not insignificant number - of priests can't be pastors. They are priests, they can't be pastors and so they are vicars (vicars are an assistant by the way, a full priest, but who assists the pastor and his ministry in a parish) So the probably the primary driving point that is most crucial as we won't have enough priests in at 10 years or less. We're going to be running out of priests to run our 120-160 churches in the archdiocese.

The second reason is we have a lot of churches including our own that until very recently have been running at a deficit, not making enough money to bid to meet bills. Our deficit has actually been fairly small, but some parishes are running a five or even six digit deficit, which is to say between 10 and 100 thousand dollars - where they're pulling from savings or they're getting infusions of money. Sometimes there's a bequest or some sort of grant, but those parishes are living right on the edge.

The third big aspect is numbers in parishes. And I think you'll see that our parish and others have declined in attendance. During Father Harris' time as pastor, we had around a thousand people attending Mass on a weekend.

Those numbers have been steadily declining - even between priests. You'll notice that even between pastors, those numbers have consistently gone down. Our fire code capacity is 933 people - but our current weekend attendance (all Masses combined) is between 500 and 600 people. We could fit every person who comes to mass into one Mass. With the other parishes of our parish families, you can see similar numbers where they have a capacity of one number and a weekend attendance with a much smaller number. So the primary considerations would be priests, finances, and parishioners.

**Why the cynical outlook - if I can use that word - on the ability to gain more priests in the future versus this outlook that things are only going to get worse?**

I can't speak exactly to why the archbishop is choosing the direction he's choosing, but I can tell you that the urgency & decision to move this way almost assuredly comes from the tension between raising new priests (a 9-10 year process) and the current crisis of parish life. We currently have just 13 candidates at various states of seminary formation. So I would hazard to guess that this a great part of why we're moving in this direction and in this way isn't cynicism is the sense that we can't wait for whatever optimistic change would happen. And we **do** need to pray for vocations. We do need to encourage vocations, and frankly, take our faith seriously such that we're evangelizing! But in the meantime we're going to have to make cuts, as I think the logic behind all of this.

**Is this happening nationwide?**

Well so not every diocese is doing this. Many are, however - I would point particularly to Chicago and Cincinnati as places that are: Cincinnati is in progress with a program called *Beacons of Hope*. Chicago did this a few years ago, though I forget the name of their process.

Ours looks a lot more like Cincinnati's program, where they did this process of bringing communities together, spending some years consulting together, and then making a decision. I believe Chicago went the route of just merging, so I don't know if they closed anything - just merged everything.

I would also highlight that somewhere on the east coast just closed parishes [a parishioner pointed out that it was the diocese of Saint Louis]. They closed something like 80 parishes. They announced it ahead of time, but it was a decision from above of 'we're closing these parishes'. I also know that in many diocese, even if they haven't initiated a process, they're facing this reality.

### **How did it go?**

I can only give you anecdotal information; I don't have official numbers and while I have a couple friends in Chicago, I have no friends in Cincinnati so I can only tell you what I'm told. Admittedly, I'm told things about Cincinnati from people who are organizing it here. So, they're keen to emphasize the positive fruits (and there are going to be some positive fruits!), but I have no other answer to that.

I have priest friends in Chicago and by their accounts it's rough. And to be fair, they're still in the midst of it. The parishes have indeed been merged in their case - I don't think they closed any parishes or if they did it was imminent (financial crisis, roof collapsing, that kind of thing). The roughness I hear from priests covers several aspects: a single priest taking on multiple parishes, communities being thrust together and having to learn how to adapt to differences, and so on. And while it may sound strange to use the word 'only' here, the truth is that they've only been at it for a few years. It takes probably a generation - maybe 10 years or so - for something like to really unfold and for those changes to start to come together in a stable way. So they're not done yet and it's probably not fair to say that the current difficulties are where they're going to stay.

### **So, in a way, this is like a kind of arranged marriage - but with input both ways?**

'Both ways' is very important because while yes, it is kind of an arranged marriage, we're also getting to give important feedback - feedback that really matters. It may not be weighted in the way we personally desire or in the sense that we want - particularly aware that this isn't a democracy where we vote - but that feedback is important and taken into

consideration.

I would share that the initial proposal for our parish family was Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, and Saint Luke. Our feedback among the priests was resoundingly emphatic that that wouldn't work. And at first, there was resistance to accepting that feedback, but they did indeed take our feedback and created this current configuration. So I want to emphasize that you can have confidence that they do really listen, even if the final decision isn't entirely what you suggest. I genuinely believe that there is a desire to hear our feedback, to consider it, and to speak to it one way or the other.

### **Will we still have deacons helping the priests?**

Yes. Any clerics (priests and deacons) may be up for retirement or may tell the bishop they are not able to assist in certain circumstances - not out of disobedience but out of pragmatic concern. But yes, deacons will continue in ministry.

### **What's a deanery?**

I'm sorry - I use terms and assume everyone know them. A deanery is a region within the archdiocese. So the archdiocese is the entire region under which our archbishop leads. So our archdiocese extends, from the border of Canada to the border of Portland, everything west of the mountains. A deanery is a subregion within the archdiocese in which parishes are grouped.

I think we have seven or eight deaneries. I don't remember how many we have, but there's the Kitsap peninsula makes up the majority of the Olympic Deanery. Seattle is split into two deaneries - the North Seattle Deanery and the South Seattle Deanery. North of us is the Snohomish Deanery.

### **How do deaneries pertain to *Partners in the Gospel*?**

Deaneries both matter and they don't. They matter in the sense that historically, people don't generally go across deanery lines - if they're at one parish and one deanery, they're generally going to be committed to it.

Deanery have a little bit of canonical status too - not much - but if deanery boundaries change, there are some ecclesial implications that will need to be considered. But it matters mostly inasmuch as we have to be deliberate about it.

It doesn't matter inasmuch as we are merging some parishes across deanery lines where it makes sense to do so. Eventually the deanery lines and the parish boundaries are all going to have to be redrawn - but that's a step that will happen much further down the road.

### **What about the consecration of churches?**

That is a great question and it's very relevant because every church building is consecrated under the name of a saint. Here at Saint marks, we have maintained the tradition of marking that consecration with twelve candles (because a church is consecrated with twelve anointings of holy oil).

Typically the parish name matches the church's name, because (usually) a parish only has one church. A church, once consecrated can never be changed - so the church of Saint Mark will always be Saint Mark, the church of Saint Matthew will always be Saint Matthew, and so on. But *parish names* CAN change - because the parish is not the church. A parish is the gathering of the community at a particular location. So not immediately, but eventually, the parish family will together - all of the combined communities - will decide on a new parish name.

For instance, in Everett, they went through a form of this process a few years ago. Immaculate Conception parish and Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish were both individual parishes & churches that got joined together. Although the church names stayed the same, the new name of the *parish* is Our Lady of Hope. Like them, it will be a new way of thinking - of the church building versus the parish name.

### **You mentioned that in prior discussions it was said that Saint Mark, Saint Luke, and Saint Matthew wouldn't work. Why?**

Though I wasn't alone in asserting that that configuration wouldn't work, I will only speak for myself - I don't want to speak for the other priests. My

feedback was twofold: one was quite purely the east/west transportation. If you're looking at north/south movement, you've got I-5 running the length of things. If you're going to merge parishes, I asserted that having them run the length of I-5, makes it easier. If you are maintaining multiple locations - even temporarily - priests, staff and parishioners are going to be moving between locations for various reasons. East/west travel is much harder than north/south travel. And keep in mind that when I speak about travel, I don't mean only between the church buildings, but also the territory that's involved.

The other factor is the cultures between the parishes that Saint Mark and Saint Luke parishes. Sadly, they have had a historically rocky relationship - such that merging them would inflame those issues at a time when tensions are already going to be high. Again, I can only speak to my own specific feedback but I wasn't alone giving that feedback.

### **Where did the current configuration - changed from including Saint Luke to including Saint Catherine - come from?**

As I understand it, this current configuration was (re)considered in light of prior work done in this deanery some 10 or more years ago to look ahead at possible mergers or consolidations - one of those proposals was the coming together of Saint Mark, Saint Matthew, and Saint Catherine parishes. So when that idea was brought up in June at the priest gathering, there was some enthusiasm, from some of the guys about that, i won't say it was universally acclaimed, but i will say that it was more acclaimed than the Saint Mark, Saint Luke, Saint Matthew proposal.

### **What are the limits of feedback?**

That's a good question. I would say that they were pretty clear with us - and I wish they were a little more transparent about it with the whole archdiocese - that they have a preset number of parish families that they're shooting for. I want to say it's between 60 and 68 families. And the number is exactly based on the projection of how many pastors will ultimately have in that 10 projection. And so they want to have a buffer because even if you're projecting 67 or 70 pastors that number could fluctuate up or down, and we don't want to do this process again.

I will tell you that the configuration change between Saint Mark, Saint Matthew and Saint Luke to the configuration with Saint Matthew and Saint Catherine required them to add a parish family that they did not initially want to add, but did in light of the points that we made about.

**Is there some place that shows us all the parish family configurations?**

In fact, yes! Just today (Saturday, September 23, 2023) the archdiocese sent out an email to pastors that they have now made public the whole list of parish families. We'll be posting that on our parish website and sharing it via email this weekend.

**Is there a set number of parishes to be consolidated per family?**

No. There are actually a very small number of parishes that are not being consolidated - or rather, they're each a parish family of one. Those parish families tend to be very specific exceptions. For example, Blessed Sacrament parish is a Dominican-run and owned parish that exclusively serves the local university. The FSSP (Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter) is another religious community that runs and owns the North American Martyrs parish - only offering the Mass in the the Extraordinary Form. There's also a parish in our deanery - Saint Andrew Kim - that is almost exclusively Korean in culture and language. All three of these parishes serve in a special kind of mission-type way that wouldn't work in a group of parishes.

That said, it seems to me that in ordinary circumstances, the diocese is shooting for two or three parishes. When you look at the list, you'll see that most of the parish families are three-parish families. But with a little research (using the official Archdiocesan website), you'll notice that where there are two-parish families, at least one of them will be very large. I'd guess that in those cases, the number of parishes was deliberately limited because of the great number of parishioners already being served between the two parishes.

**What's the realistic attrition that is going to happen during/after all**

## **of this?**

Obviously I don't know the exact answer to that, but I can tell you my experience - and I have had no small experience with closing and merging parishes (I was pastor of nine churches prior to this assignment and had to close four of them over a 4-year period).

In short, I would say that we are likely to lose a third or more of our community: people who are discouraged and leave the faith, people who are discouraged because they don't like the configuration and go somewhere else, people who are discouraged and go away for a while, and people who just stop going to church. I think that it's reasonable to expect, at least in the short term, a 33% drop in membership.

I would also say that is a challenge for us who remain. One of the messages I repeated often while doing this previously was that we are not baptized into the church of Saint Mark, or Saint Catherine, or wherever - we are baptized into the Body of Christ. And the Body of Christ is present wherever Christians are gathered, regardless of the building.

I don't mean to downplay the pain, the genuine pain!, of the possibility of our community changing or closing. That's real, and it's going to happen in some way. But we'll need to cling to our faith and to the community, regardless of how it takes shape or is re-shaped.

## **Why is the archdiocese doing this in the face of the possibility - or probability - of that drop? And what is the archdiocese doing to bolster people?**

I think that the archdiocese is doing this because they believe that the circumstances are desperate enough that we have to make a change.

I think that the diocese has the idea that this very process itself is going to bolster people. For some that may be true, though I think for many, maybe even most, that won't be true. I think it's going to fall to us in our local communities to really focus on how we bolster ourselves and bolster our fellow community members.

Our pastoral council has talked about this to some great degree even before *Partners in the Gospel*. The focus right now is get people in the same room together to do something that we enjoy doing, as often as possible. It sounds a little irreverent to say it, but I'm going to say it anyway: the second most important thing to any life of a community is coffee hour. Not because coffee or donuts is important, but because we need to get together in a casual way, to get to know each other and love each other. That is what gets us through those moments when it's very difficult.

Is the archdiocese doing much more? I don't see it. But frankly, I think it's fair to say the diocese is really caught up in the process itself. And I don't know if it's reasonable to expect that the chancery or the bishop organize archdiocese-wide revivals. I don't want to absolve the diocese of responsibility for maybe encouraging or offering us opportunities, but the responsibility lies with us.

**Are they looking at any of the potential changing demographics of areas when they make these determinations?**

I don't know, but I can tell you that the diocese loves its numbers! The archdiocese has been collecting civil demographic numbers for years - who was moving where, where jobs were blowing up, where jobs were, and so on. I would assume that they weren't just collecting it, but that they are using it in this.

**What happens to the material goods - especially sacred things - when a church closes?**

It helps to call to mind the principle that a parish is the collection of the people of God, in a region, gathered in a particular spot. So when a church closes, the diocese does its best to gather information about where those parishioners go.

For example, if 20% go one place, 30% another, still 40% elsewhere, whatever is fungible and liquid (namely, money) follows those parishioners. To be clear you *won't* be getting a check in the mail! The money is still institutionally the Church's, but those goods would follow those parishioners to their new communities.

With material goods, it's a little harder, as you can't always split those so evenly. But since closures don't happen overnight, those things would be identified, itemized, and then their new destination discussed & decided in advance of the closing of the parish. If something doesn't get transferred or 'claimed' (if you will), the diocese puts it into a special archive where it can be used at a different parish if and when the need or opportunity arises.

### **What about relics?**

Relics are always removed when a parish closes.

### **What about the church building?**

If a church is going to be decommissioned, if you will, its consecration is removed by the bishop. From there, it can be sold - but with some strict conditions: it can be for profane (non-liturgical) but not sordid (antithetical to our faith) use. The archdiocese has been burned in the past because of some naivete in this regard, so they do a LOT of vetting before selling property.

### **What about music at the other parishes in our draft parish family? And will the archdiocese create/enforce standards for music at the new parish families?**

Oh boy. I've learned that if you ever want to tick off your people at a parish, change the music, Mass times, or mess with money. People feel SUPER strongly about all three - especially music. As for what's the music like, at Saint Catherine parish? I don't know. Nor at Saint Matthew parish. I'd be willing to bet that it's probably the common practice of standard hymns - but that's just my guess.

But I daresay that the real question for folks who care about music is 'what about the style of music that I like? What if I don't like the music at [insert church name here]? I can't tell you what'll happen, especially since it's most likely that I won't be the pastor of this parish family. But I can tell you that compromises MUST be made. We can't just say that we've always done [X] at this location, so anything who comes here has to suck it up. We also can't say that we're going to abandon everything we've done here and just

transform into what others do. We have to find middle ground.

That means being willing to have guitars at some Masses, folk music at other Masses, chant at some Masses, Latin in other Masses. In all things we should be following Church teaching on what liturgical music should look like. If you haven't done so, I highly recommend reading *Musicam Sacram* and *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, both of which are right out of Vatican II and speak to what music in the liturgy should look like. The Church is actually quite strict about what kind of music it does or doesn't allow.

But also.... Even if a parish is doing it wrong (and realistically, many are!), we can't force people to change what they're used to right after they've just lost a parish, a Mass, a priest, or all of that. We have to compromise, to offer a middle ground. We will need to both use what we know and also incorporate instrumentation, hymnody, and styles from the other communities.

As a new community, we'll need to form our liturgy according to the vision of the Church. In some ways, it's like adopting a kid from a foster home - except we're all going to be foster kids - who's got some bad habits, or some painful wounds and acts out. The parents have to relax some of the stricter rules so as to accommodate everyone and from there build everyone up together to the ideal of the whole family. Forgive me if sounds a little condescending, but the point is that we've got to have that flexibility - even if it means, I don't get what I want. We'll get what we want sometimes, but not all of the time - we've got to find a way to compromise..

**In my hometown in Minnesota, they did this and combined three parishes - but each parish has remained open. Is that possible here?**

The short answer is that it is possible that all three locations would stay open and priests to be shared among them

But the longer answer - and the more frank one - is that it isn't very likely. Speaking for myself, I know I wouldn't tolerate that as a pastor because it doesn't work long term. We're in this situation because we can't sustain all

the buildings & communities that we have. I won't say that it isn't possible - in fact, the archdiocese explicitly names it as a possibility - but I can tell you that it is unlikely. And I while I don't want to dash anyone's hopes for that kind of outcome, I do want to make sure those hopes are also informed by pragmatism.

**Why would we move priests in the midst of all of this change - doesn't it make more sense to keep a priest in a location for the stability?**

Here's the problem. Say I stay at Saint Marks and I get assigned a vicar - not a priest from Saint Catherine or Saint Matthew (Assuming this is the family that ends up being chose). Consider the perspective of parishioners from Saint Matthew and Saint Catherine. Wouldn't it be reasonable for them to feel like Father Maurer is going to be less inclined - regardless of how fair-minded and wonderful he might be - to feel like he is going to be biased towards the parish at which he has been pastor for five years? He knows it better, he is better connected to their members, and so on - how could he not?

Similarly, if Father Marc Powell or Father Khanh Nguyen (pastors of Saint Catherine and Saint Matthew, respectively) were named pastor of the whole parish family, wouldn't it be the same - albeit in reverse? Would Saint Mark parishioners trust that priest to prioritize their concerns in the same way that he would with parishioners, staff, and issues at the parish where he has served for so long? It wouldn't necessarily even be malicious - just a bias, or fear of bias.

I propose to you that those considerations of bias (or wide-spread perception of bias) are not worth it as opposed to having a new face and a new perspective, that it is a hard transition but would be a harder transition if an existing priest were to stay.

**What about our schools? Will the individual character of schools be able to be maintained? Will the archdiocese create some sort of overarching way to support that or even guide that?**

Short answer: I don't know.

The diocese has been real squirrely on this one particularly, and if you read their documentation, the answers are very unsatisfactory. I think - and to be clear, this is very much MY opinion, not anything official, I think that the diocese is very nervous about addressing this!

A lot of people are attached to schools and how they are - and there's little scarier than parents. Angry parents, particularly and secondly, unhappy donors to schools. And our schools - almost all of them - are on life support in some way. It's a very rare school in our archdiocese that is financially solvent, much less profitable. And so the diocese is super nervous, I think.

So the archdiocese is careful to make no guarantees, because they just can't guarantee anything. There are some schools that are right on the cusp of crisis and could close fairly quickly. But for the vast majority, nothing is going to happen at least for a year or two. In my conversations here at Saint Mark, I've told our faculty & staff that it seems highly unlikely that anything will change in the first full school year after implementation (2024-2025) - because the new priest is going to be struggling just as much as anyone else to get his footing.

The common practice - I suspect - will be to keep things open for at least a year and get a sense of what's going on and what might be possible. What's the immediate fallout or benefit of these new parish families? From there the priest and parish can discern what to do next.

I don't think that the diocese has some overarching plan for schools. My guess is that they recognize that there's no overarching solution. Our school is unique where we're one of the few classical Catholic educations in the archdiocese, though that doesn't give us some kind of protected status. We also only have 127 students in our school and our projected to have a 234 thousand dollar deficit at the end of the school year. So our school is both unique and also not so unique - particularly in its troubled status financially.

On the flip side, Saint Catherines has 260 students and pulls a tidy profit - but is dependent on south Seattle wealth & culture, which would not be as present in the new parish family. In other words, neither bulletproof nor is either expendable. I think that the schools are going to go a lot slower than the parishes because of how much more reactive parents & donors alike can be with the future of their children.

### **Did the archdiocese take into consideration the number of schools they would put into a family?**

At first, no. Initially, they were just grouping parishes and one of our big complaints at the feedback was that there were multiple parishes with multiple schools - one even had four parishes AND four schools. The universal priest response was simply that that was nuts, and the archdiocese realized that too.

But also, its important to recognize that the archdiocese doesn't have a target for how many schools to keep open or close. The methodology they've chosen is to ask folks on the local level to help make those decisions. That may involve admitting some hard truths about circumstances or outlooks we've avoided, as well as consider possibilities.

Are there a fixed number of families that the archdiocese has said there will be?

Yes there is a fixed number of parish families, although they're willing to be somewhat flexible on it. I can all but guarantee it won't go over 70 - because projections show us at just a few more pastors than that. But I don't know what the exact number is.

### **What factors went into creation of the parish families in their various forms?**

My understanding and again my understanding is that geography is probably one of the biggest concerns just because some of the areas of the diocese are very geographically diverse. So for instance, the church in Magnolia - Our Lady of Fatima - could not be paired with some of the

parishes that are just across the water because of the very limited roads going in and out of that section of Seattle.

I think that another major consideration was building size, because at some point decisions are going to have to be made about where you can have the least number of masses with the most number of people. If you're looking at dwindling numbers of priests, you've got to have a church that can fit the more people that are going to come to that limited number of masses.

As for history, I propose to you that the diocese has done a lot to avoid allowing cultural or historical conflict from being a major factor. The fact of the matter is that a lot of parishes haven't gotten along or even split into competing communities. At some point, we have to get over our cultural differences. So while those may be considerations at some level - because you can't, you can't ignore them entirely - the diocese is assuredly going to push us to work through them.

**What's the latitude essentially that we're going to have on the local level or is the diocese going to create standards for everyone to follow?**

I'm going to give you my slightly teasing response but also slightly serious response: at the end of the day, the pastor is like unto God! So it is the pastor who makes the final decision.

Of course, the archdiocese can set whatever standards, we priests have promised respect and obedience to the archbishop. So, when he or the Church speaks authoritatively, we're going to do our best to honor & follow that - but the pastor makes the decision, ultimately and we need to own that authority and responsibility.

Now, a smart pastor is NOT going to come in and say 'I'm doing whatever I want'!. First of all, because that's a great way for misery, for the rest of his time at that parish. And keep in mind that priests are just as befuddled, anxious, angry, discouraged, hopeful, fill-in-the-blank as the rest of you!

For myself, one of the biggest strategies I rely on is having people get together as often as possible. The best thing you can do is get groups together to talk about the issues and talk about what you're considering. Sometimes the pastor has to make a decision unilaterally or despite a consensus *against* his decision, but the best path forward almost always involves mutual discussion & discernment.

And by & large, the diocese is going to leave it to us to work that through because if the diocese established a giant standard that everybody had to follow it would inevitably fail in all sorts of ways because there are so many different peoples & situations.

**So the archdiocese doesn't necessarily have a standardized plan, but they may have benchmarks along the way?**

I think that's a very good way to look at it. The archdiocese will assuredly be tracking progress, establishing basics of what might or might not be permissible, and the archbishop will approve (or not) major decisions.

Hopefully, by the way, that also comes as some consolation - not only in allowing for freedom at the local level, but also because it means a priest can't go rogue and steer everything on his own. There will be lines we have stay in, parameters to follow, in which we can chart our own course.

**Where is our pastor and vicar going to be stationed (ie, living)?**

Short answer - we don't know! When I first came to Saint Mark parish, I asked for and received special permission to live off-campus in order to live with a brother priest for support & fraternity. It wasn't until last year that I moved into the rectory here at Saint Mark parish. That's one example of the kind of discernment that can be made.

If a priest has three campuses, there's a lot that could go into that discernment. For example, one priest friend has remarked that if he were to be pastor of a specific parish family, he would move to the rectory *opposite* of the larger parish so as to emphasize that the smaller parish was getting equal consideration and care.

It's even possible that a pastor lives at one place and the vicar at another, though I personally would discourage that. Part of this process is the emphasis on priestly fraternity - and we're going to need support in all of this as well. One of the things I've greatly appreciated about living with other priests is the ability to consult, commiserate, and relax together when the going gets tough.

**Are you three pastors (of the proposed parish family) talking to each other?**

Keep in mind because we are all pretty much in the same boat as you. The diocese hasn't given us a lot of indicators about who's going where - in fact they've been very vague because they can't do more than that yet. And so we're really hesitant to make any real firm communication overtures because about future plans because odds are good that all three of the current pastors within this proposed parish family are going to be moved. It doesn't make sense to me doing a lot of communicating back and forth because right now we don't know where we're going to be or even what the community is reacting to or how it's going to go. We don't even know if this is the final draft configuration. So talking together about future plans doesn't make sense just yet.

**When do ministry start combining once the final configurations have been decided?**

Much like other decisions, the community & the pastor will decide that kind of thing as they come together and over time. I would speculate that most priests would be loath to change anything in the first few months unless there's an imminent issue.

For the most part, most of us look at this with a desire to sustain existing groups, so the strategy would be to get them in the same room together to talk about what they want to do, what might work, what should separate or join together. Ideally, the pastor will be discerning, consulting, and praying over all of that and then coming to a decision. But the short answer is, there's no real predetermined time when those changes are going to happen,

### **Will registered parishioners have to re-register?**

In short, no. We're transitioning to a new parish management platform called ParishStaq - if you're currently registered at a parish, your information is already migrated there and awaiting final activation for when we make the shift. The big change you'll have to make is not in registered (or re-registering) but if you registered *at multiple parishes* - because ultimately the new platform and *Partners in the Gospel* are prompting us to have folks registered at just one parish. But initially everyone will simply transition in-place to the parish family. If a parishioner is registered at multiple sites, they will be assigned to the one that makes the most sense (where they're active). And of course, parishioners are free to move parishes as they choose.

### **Will we get an opportunity to hear the things that parishioners from Saint Catherine and Saint Matthew are concerned about joining up with us here at Saint Mark?**

I would certainly hope so. Because it's still a draft family configuration and because they will be hearing it for the first time tonight and tomorrow, we aren't there yet. And again, the archbishop won't be making his final decision until December - announcing early in 2024. My thought that once that final decision is announced, those conversations would start.

But keep in mind, we pastors are all going to be moved, so the biggest value will be in parishioners talking to each other - even across parish boundaries - and with the new priests who come in on July 1, 2024.

### **I'm concerned that I don't know enough about the other parishes in this proposed family configuration to give meaningful feedback**

Your meaningful feedback is your perspective - 'I think that X will work' 'I worry that Y won't work' 'I propose that Z might be a better solution'. That's what they're really looking for.

Yes, it's subjective and limited and that's human, that's okay. Your feedback, even if you feel like it's imperfect is still a helpful. And again, those two questions are crucial: **What does/doesn't work?** And **What do**

**you propose instead?** Answer those as best you can.

Your input helpful because at the end of the day they don't know the reality on the ground or the ramifications of the changes at the local level.

**Will we know the configurations on January 1st?**

The archdiocese has basically said that we'll be told at the beginning of the year. Initially, there was more confidence in saying the beginning of January, but now they're focusing more on late January or early February.

**Will the priest assignments be announced at that time?**

No - priest assignments won't be announced until April or May.

**At what point will church closures be decided?**

Ultimately, that's going to be decided over the three-year period of discernment, starting when this all takes effect on July 1, 2023. But even that timetable isn't hard and fast. The new parish family will discuss and discern with the new pastor so that an proposed closures that are submitted to the archbishop (who makes the final decision) have been talked over extensively among the community.

And the archbishop has been very clear that we will be consulting with our people, with leadership, and so on. They haven't articulated what that process may look like, but the archbishop has made that expectation clear.

**I'm concerned that these announcements will affect fundraising, especially school fundraising, that happens during these scheduled announcements**

Frankly, that's a likely situation. One of the strategies we're taking here at Saint Mark parish is to talk about all three of our major stewardship campaigns (parish stewardship, the school drive, and the Annual Catholic Appeal) throughout the entire year. Focusing our efforts at specific times as we have done in the past doesn't make as much sense precisely because these announcements are going to take up much of our time, energy, and emotions.

### **What is the parish family that involves Saint Luke?**

The proposed parish family there is Saint Luke and Christ the King

### **How much of this is a result of the abuse crisis?**

While I don't know how much of this is a *direct* result of the abuse crisis, it seems only reasonable to say that the abuse crisis - among other things - weighs heavily on the life of the Church. Bishops, in particular, are not trusted by Catholics (lay and cleric alike). I'm not pointing at any particular bishop, but rather to the reality that bishops are considered suspect. Sadly, it seems that many - maybe even most - bishops don't realize or want to acknowledge this reality, which only makes that worse.

But there is also complacency in the pews. Catholics everywhere have fallen into the assumption that things are just going to continue on as they always have. But what we need now is look in the mirror and see how *we* are being called to conversion. It's easy to blame bishops and there's blame of plenty to go there that is deserved. But also, I would propose the average catholic just does the minimum and not much more, and they haven't been challenged to do more than minimum. We need to renew our ourselves, too, if we're going to see our communities renewed.

### **Have retired priests been involved in these decisions?**

Absolutely! Every priest - regardless of status (retired, pastor, vicar, etc) - has been invited and encouraged to be part of all of this. And we rely on our retired priests, so we want to be sure that their voice is also heard.

### **What about bringing priests from other countries, like Africa, to help here?**

I think, sometimes, we look at these other countries as resources to be mined. I know I don't use this language a lot, but there's something very white privilege about - that we're going to go to other countries and take their priests and bring them over to our country. This question isn't meant to be part of that mindset, but there's something dangerous about looking to other countries to solve our problems. Because the real need is the revitalization of our communities and our vocations.

We do have priests coming from Africa, from India, from South America, and elsewhere. They're called externs (as in, external priests) because they're basically on loan from their religious communities or dioceses. The biggest problem in this regard isn't a shortage of supply, it is that guys coming in from other countries can't be pastors - at least not for a while. Acclimating, learning the culture - and sometimes the English language - takes 3-5 years. And sometimes, that's the entirety of their stay.

Nonetheless, we do have a great number of wonderful priests from other countries who assist as vicars throughout the archdiocese (and some who are also pastors). But we can't look to other places to supply us with priests for our archdiocese.