

SECTION IV
Parish
Organization



CHAPTER 1. OVERVIEW OF DIOCESAN ORGANIZATION

DIOCESE

- A portion of the People of God entrusted to a bishop for him to shepherd in collaboration with his priests. The bishop gathers this portion of the People of God in the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Eucharist (*Code of Canon Law*, c. 369).
- A particular Church in which the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative (c. 369)
- Limited, as a rule, to a definite territory so that it includes all the faithful living in that territory
- Is divided into distinct parts, or parishes (c. 374 §1)

REGION

- A group of neighboring parishes that have been joined together by the bishop to foster pastoral care through common action (c. 374 §2)
- Is often called a vicariate forane or a deanery in other dioceses
- There are six regions in the diocese; every parish belongs to a region.

AREA FAITH COMMUNITY

- Organized within a specific geographic area, which takes into account population centers, school districts, shopping patterns, and important community services such as health care
- Comprised of two or more parishes, all of which can gain substantial advantages by offering a more comprehensive set of pastoral services for their parishioners by being part of the group
- Advances the mission of the Church in an area based on the needs and resources of its constituent parishes
- Entrusted to the care of a single pastor, preferably, or of a few pastoral leaders
- Has an Area Pastoral Council and subcommittees
- Shares the cost of area personnel, ministries, and pastoral programs by a proportionate assessment

PARISH

- A certain community of Christ's faithful within the diocese (c. 515 §1), determined by a specific geographic area. All of the diocese's parishes are territorial.
- Advances the mission of the Church in collaboration with other parishes in its area faith community
- Is in the care of one or more priests, one of which is pastor, or a pastoral administrator, whose pastoral care is directed by a priest with the powers and faculties of a pastor
- Has membership on the Area Pastoral Council and committees
- Has an active Administrative Council
- Can have more than one church building, but only one primary church, called the "parish church"

CHURCH BUILDING

- The most common sacred place designated for divine worship of the faithful (c. 1214)
- Is dedicated or blessed by the diocesan bishop, who maintains authority and oversight over it
- Has a title, which does not change after it has been dedicated (c. 1218)
- Has a public character, in that the faithful, whether parishioners or not, have the right of entry for the exercise of divine worship (c. 1214)
- Is entrusted for the good of souls to a specific parish, which can have one or more church buildings

- Can be closed on the grounds that it is no longer financially feasible to maintain it. Such a decision requires consultation with the diocesan Committee on Parishes and the Priests' Council, and a decree by the bishop.

ORATORY

- A type of sacred place similar to, but distinguished from, a church building in Church law. Unlike a parish, it is not a community of Christ's faithful; it does not have territorial boundaries (c. 1223).
- A place for divine worship designated by the bishop for the benefit of some community or group of the faithful, such as a religious congregation, university students, or the residents of a nursing home
- Differs from a church building primarily because all the faithful have the right to enter a church, whereas the right of access to an oratory is limited to the specific community for which it was established
- Parishes whose church buildings were to be converted to oratories under the *Third Plan for Parishes*, but did not complete this process for whatever reason, will not be expected to do so under this *Plan for Parishes*.

MERGED ("CLOSED") PARISH

- Is assigned a designated or destination parish in a decree of merger
- Its territory is conjoined with that of a designated parish, forming a larger parish geographically.
- The civil corporation is dissolved. Property, as well as financial assets and obligations, are transferred to the designated parish.
- All its operations are integrated into the larger whole.
- The designated parish administers and maintains the records of the merged parish and, where applicable, the cemetery and the cemetery funds.
- The church building remains open and available for worship, unless otherwise stated in another decree dealing with its closure.
- Reductions in the number of Masses offered at the church are determined by the pastor or pastoral leaders with the approval of the bishop.
- In exceptional circumstances, the territory and the property of a merged parish could be divided into two or more parts, with each part then being transferred to a different designated parish.

CHAPTER 2. THE AREA FAITH COMMUNITY

Introduced in the Third Plan for Parishes, the area faith community model represented a new and innovative way of organizing parishes. In the spirit of communio, parishes were asked to cultivate stronger bonds of cooperation amongst each other. Effective collaboration would bring about a greater flourishing of their various ministries for the benefit of the Catholic faithful and others in the area. More than simply a cluster, the area faith community is designed to be the primary functional and consultative organization by which pastoral care would be carried out for its constituent parishes. It facilitates pastoral governance of several parishes by a single pastor.

A. The Area Faith Community

An area faith community is a group of two or more parishes based on geography and the sizes of its constituent parishes. Geographically, the parishes must have contiguous territorial boundaries. Often there will be a single large town within the area faith community, where people go to shop, attend school, receive their health care, and take advantage of government services. The area faith community model recognizes that we have become a highly mobile society; people will drive considerable distances for things that are important to them. At the same time, they also value convenience. Other things being equal, it is better for Masses and other church events to be scheduled in places where people are going to be anyway.

All parishes stand to gain from participation in area faith communities. By pooling the talents, efforts, and resources of parishioners, AFCs can offer a more comprehensive set of pastoral services than individual parishes, no matter what their size. Yet AFCs are especially important for small parishes. These parishes are so small that they cannot provide comprehensive pastoral care for their parishioners without some outside help.

Now-retired Bishop John J. McRaith of the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky, has pointed out that small, rural parishes have accepted something less than adequate ministry, sometimes for generations, because of a shortage of priests or lack of trained staff. He envisioned collaboration among similar parishes as the solution (see John J. McRaith, "Adopting Structures Within the Particular Church of the Twenty-First Century," *CLSA Proceedings* 56 (1994), pp. 25-26; Bishop McRaith was originally a priest of the Diocese of New Ulm).

Area faith communities with several small parishes can combine their parish staffs, volunteers, and other resources to provide ministries that were difficult if not impossible to provide before. An RCIA program, social outreach initiatives, and good religious education, to name a few examples, come within reach. For area faith communities with one or more larger parishes, providing comprehensive pastoral ministry becomes even easier. Even if they are comparatively self-sufficient, larger parishes should recognize the importance of working with their smaller counterparts to give all Catholics in an area the opportunity to thrive.

As of 2012, seventy-two of the Diocese of New Ulm's seventy-six parishes work collaboratively in twenty-three area faith communities. Typically, all the parishes in an AFC are entrusted to the care of a single pastor. This will become more and more common as the number of priests who can fill the role of pastor declines. Alternately, there can be two or more pastors, or pastors together with one or more pastoral administrators, within an AFC. Though they are appointed to specific parishes, these pastoral leaders work together, sharing staff and resources to maximize the effectiveness of area ministries.

B. Profile of the Area Faith Community

1. **Membership** – Members of each area faith community remain members of one of the collaborating parishes. They may attend Mass at any parish and make their envelope contributions in any parish's collection.
2. **Pastoral Leadership** – Typically, one priest is assigned by the bishop to be pastor of all the parishes in an area faith community. Alternately, there can be a team of pastoral leaders who have been appointed by the bishop. The bishop may also appoint senior associates, other parochial vicars, and deacons to serve with the pastor. The pastor, in turn, appoints pastoral associates, business managers, school principals, directors of liturgy, directors of religious education, and others to serve the AFC or specific parishes.
3. **Civil Corporation** – Each parish retains its separate civil corporation. All financial assets and liabilities remain separate. Oversight is provided by the pastor/pastoral administrator.
4. **Trustees and Corporate Board** – Each parish has its own trustees and corporate board made up of the bishop, vicar general, pastor/pastoral administrator, and two lay trustees.
5. **Parish Administrative Council** – Each parish has an Administrative Council, understood in Church law as the Finance Council. The Administrative Council is accountable to and advisory to the pastor/pastoral administrator. The Administrative Council meets regularly (see Administrative Council Guidelines in the Appendix).
6. **Area Pastoral Council** – Pastoral planning for area ministries is conducted by pastoral leaders, in collaboration with the Area Pastoral Council. The Council should consist of the area pastoral leaders and representatives from each of the parishes. The Area Pastoral Council meets regularly (see Area Pastoral Council Guidelines in the Appendix).
7. **Proportionate Assessment** – Pastoral leaders, in collaboration with the Area Pastoral Council, determine a proportionate assessment for each parish to provide revenues for shared expenses that are necessary for effective pastoral ministry in the area, such as personnel, ministries, programs, and resources (see Area Assessment Guidelines in the Appendix).
8. **Area Committees** – Committees of the Area Pastoral Council report to that group. They should be comprised of representatives from each parish. The committees should meet regularly (see Area Pastoral Council Committees in the Appendix).
9. **Cemeteries** – Parish cemetery committees report to their respective Administrative Council.
10. **Other Parish Organizations** – Organizations such as the Council of Catholic Women can determine for themselves whether to meet at the parish level or as an area group.
11. **Sunday Liturgies** – The pastor or pastoral leaders should determine the daily, weekly, and seasonal Sunday liturgy schedules in consultation with the Area Worship Committee, the Area Pastoral Council, and parish Administrative Councils.
12. **Shared Liturgical Celebrations** – If possible, Holy Days, the Triduum, and other special celebrations and rituals should be held at a common location or locations. Provided that there is adequate seating capacity, these celebrations may be rotated.

13. **Area Faith Community Bulletin** – The area faith community is encouraged to publish a common bulletin. Individual parish information or flyers can be added or inserted.
14. **Name of Area Faith Community** – Most area faith communities in the diocese now have official titles, because they have been officially established. Those still lacking names should complete the area faith community planning process by developing ministerial action plans. They can then submit a list of recommended names to the bishop in accordance with the diocesan “Names for Area Faith Communities Guidelines” so that he can select one and the AFC can receive official recognition.
15. **Other Ministerial Personnel** – Any new or existing staff positions on the parish level, such as director of religious education, youth minister, business manager, and so forth, should continue to be evaluated to determine how these staff members could become involved in the area ministries.
16. **Ministries** – Each area faith community should assess how the mission of the diocesan Church is being witnessed to and whether a full range of high-quality ministerial activity is available to the area. The chapter of this plan on the “Identity and Mission of the Diocese of New Ulm,” as well as the section on the diocesan pastoral vision, should provide the basis for this assessment. AFCs should review their plans annually and update them as necessary or recommended. Typically, new AFC plans should be drafted for review by the Committee on Parishes every five years. AFCs are encouraged to use pastoral planning and related diocesan resources in the development of AFC plans.

CHAPTER 3. THE PARISH

A parish is a specific community of the Christian faithful established within a diocese. Its pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor, who shepherds it under the authority of the diocesan bishop. All the parishes in the Diocese of New Ulm are territorial; they have specific geographical boundaries, even though people from outside those boundaries can become members by registering. In imitation of Christ, Head of the Church, the pastor fulfills his offices of teaching, sanctifying, and governing his flock in the parish, with the assistance of other priests, deacons, and lay people. Through the actions of parish members, the mission of the Church becomes the mission of the parish – to extend Christ’s salvation and love to everyone in the world.

A. What is a Parish?

The *Code of Canon Law* defines the parish as “a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular Church; the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop” (c. 515 §1). This definition has four elements: (1) the community of Christ’s faithful; (2) the stability of that community as part of a diocese; (3) the pastor, who is entrusted with the pastoral care of the community; and (4) the diocesan bishop, under whose authority the pastoral care is exercised. The pastor who shepherds a parish must be a validly ordained priest (c. 521 §1).

After repeating this definition, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* goes on to say that the parish is “the place where all the faithful can be gathered together for the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. The parish initiates the Christian people into the ordinary expression of the liturgical life: it gathers them together in this celebration; it teaches Christ’s saving doctrine; it practices the charity of the Lord in good works and brotherly love” (no. 2179).

The Second Vatican Council teaches that the Eucharist must be at the forefront of a pastor’s care for his flock and the focus of parish life: “In discharging their duty of sanctifying their people, pastors should see to it that the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice is the center and culmination of the whole life of the Christian community. They should labor without stint that the faithful are nourished with spiritual food through the devout and frequent reception of the sacraments and through intelligent and active participation in the liturgy” (*Christus Dominus*, no. 30 §2).

It goes without saying that the parish provides the first experience of Church for the vast majority of Catholics. Throughout their lives, it is the fundamental face of the Church, the locus for almost every significant ecclesiastical experience throughout a Catholic’s life, from Baptism to First Communion to Confirmation and Marriage. Even after death, the spiritual life of a Catholic is still tied to the parish in the celebration of a funeral, as well as in Mass intentions for them and in other public prayers for the final repose of the souls of the faithful departed.

The parish is one of the primary places in which the faithful are to live out their baptismal call to imitate Christ. Vatican II’s *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* says, “As sharers in the role of Christ as priest, prophet, and king, the laity have their work cut out for them in the life and activity of the Church. Their activity is so necessary within the Church communities that without it the apostolate of the pastors is often unable to achieve its full effectiveness” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 10). The ministerial calling of the priest achieves its full perfection with the help of the laity. The document goes on to say, “As far as

possible, the laity ought to provide helpful collaboration for every apostolic and missionary undertaking sponsored by their local parish” (no. 10).

B. The Parish as Territorial

According to canon law, all parishes are either territorial or personal:

As a general rule a parish is to be territorial, that is, one which includes the Christian faithful of a certain territory. When it is expedient, however, personal parishes are to be established determined by reason of the rite, language, or nationality of the Christian faithful of some territory, or even for some other reasons. (c. 518)

Territorial parishes, then, encompass all those who live within specific boundaries, which can be marked out on a map. All of the parishes in the Diocese of New Ulm are currently territorial. Personal parishes are exceptions to the general rule. They are established to facilitate the pastoral care of certain groups, such as Hispanics or university students.

The idea that parishes are territorial might seem odd, due to the practice of registration in the Church in America. If a parish is territorial, one becomes a member of that parish by having a domicile or quasi-domicile within its boundaries (cc. 102 §3, 107 §1). It is not really a matter of signing up or attending the liturgical celebrations of a parish, even on a regular basis. It might seem that registration would be more important for personal parishes, whose boundaries are only limited by other personal parishes of the same sort or by the territory of the diocese. In these cases, pastors might only know whom they are serving through membership rolls.

One could make the case that registering fosters the mission of the territorial parish as well. Pastors who can identify those who are interested in receiving pastoral care or in volunteering can more easily communicate with them. Nonetheless, canon law does not speak of registration. In the United States, parishes have generally adopted registration. Parishes in the Diocese of New Ulm count their membership in this way and report the number of parishioners and households they have to the diocese in their annual self study.

In embracing the practice of registration, American Catholics must be careful to avoid a Protestant understanding that a congregation is made up only of those who sign up (see Cardinal Francis E. George, OMI, “The Parish in the Mission of the Church,” in *Chicago Studies* 46 (Spring 2007): p. 39). The Catholic Church counts as its members every person who has been baptized and has thus been configured to Christ. Furthermore, in all of its parishes, the Church is essentially evangelical: She seeks to communicate Christ’s love to everyone, and especially through those great signs of Christ’s love we call the sacraments.

C. The Pastor of the Parish

According to canon law, there is a proportion or “fittingness” between the parish and the priest who is appointed to shepherd it:

The pastor (*parochus*, or parish priest) is the proper pastor (*pastor*, or shepherd) of the parish entrusted to him, exercising the pastoral care of the community committed to him under the authority of the diocesan bishop in whose ministry of Christ he has been called to share, so that for that same community he carries out the functions of teaching,

sanctifying, and governing, also with the cooperation of other presbyters or deacons and with the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful, according to the norm of law. (c. 519)

The pastor is the shepherd of the faithful in the parish. Even though other priests, deacons, and lay people assist him in various aspects of ministry, he is ultimately responsible for their pastoral care. Having been ordained to the ministerial priesthood and assigned to his parish, he acts on behalf of Christ, Head of the Church, in his offices of teaching, sanctifying, and governing, so that his parishioners can live out more perfectly their own baptismal call to holiness (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1581).

In commenting on the definition of parish provided in canon 515 §1, Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago emphasizes two elements: (1) the community of Christ's faithful, which constitutes the parish, and (2) the parish priest, to whom the pastoral care of the community is entrusted. "The essential relationship in the parish is between the faithful and the priest, who provides them with pastoral care under the bishop's authority," he says. "Priest and people are the constituents of a parish. Other ministries must support and foster that indispensable relationship" (George, p. 39).

Canon law affirms that the normal situation is to have a pastor assigned to a single parish: "A pastor is to have the parochial care of only one parish; nevertheless, because of a lack of priest or other circumstances, the care of several neighboring parishes can be entrusted to the same pastor" (c. 526 §1). The exception in this canon makes possible the single-pastor model of the area faith community, as called for in this *Plan for Parishes*.

One might object here that in encouraging the diocese to move toward one pastor for all the parishes in an area faith community, the current *Plan for Parishes* turns this exception into a rule. Isn't this an abuse of canon law? To this question, we must respond that having a single pastor shepherd multiple parishes is canonically preferable to other ways of dealing with a shortage of priests. For only priests, by reason of the sacred power they receive at ordination, can be pastors of parishes (see *Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Nonordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests*, Practical Provisions, Article 4).

D. The Mission of the Parish

In order to understand the nature of the parish better, we have to understand its purpose. Cardinal George explains that the mission of the parish is the same as the mission of the Church, which "is to share the gifts of Christ as widely as possible. It was Christ's will that everyone whom he died to save – which is everyone – should enjoy all the gifts that his Death and Resurrection gained for the world" (George, p. 26).

In the parish these gifts are bestowed, first and foremost, through the pastor acting as Christ, Head of the Church. Through him and those who collaborate with him, the Church fulfills her mission "to teach the apostolic doctrine and call people to conversion; to sanctify through the Eucharist, the sacraments, and a life of prayer; and to gather all believers into one community of common life rooted in Christ's truth and love" (George, p. 41). In this way, the parish makes Christ present and active in the world.

It is important to emphasize here that the diocese is not simply a collection of parishes; rather, the parish draws its very existence from the diocese. As the Second Vatican Council teaches, "Because it is impossible for the bishop always and everywhere to preside over the whole flock in his Church, he cannot do other than establish lesser groupings of the faithful. Among these the parishes, set up locally under a

pastor who takes the place of the bishop, are the most important: for in some manner they represent the visible Church constituted throughout the world” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 42).

So the parish does not stand on its own. It is part of a larger reality, the diocese, or local Church. As will be explained later in this section, the parish is dependent on the diocese in an important way, since the bishop alone can decide to create, suppress, or notably alter parishes (c. 515 §2). In fact, canon law obliges the bishop to divide his diocese into distinct parts, or parishes (c. 374 §1), though it gives no indication of how many. Being a part, the parish bears witness to the whole from which it is brought into being as a specific community of Christ’s faithful people.

Cardinal George also makes the point that the diocese has a certain priority over the parish because it has all the gifts that Christ wants his people to enjoy. Through the actions of the bishop, all seven sacraments are celebrated in it (including Confirmation and Holy Orders), and the community is governed in apostolic succession and in communion with the Holy See (George, p. 25). Therefore, the diocese more fully carries out the mission of the Church. This is the case even though the parish, from a practical point of view, is indispensable for achieving that mission.

CHAPTER 4. THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCH BUILDING

The word “church” can designate either a group of people or a building. As a group of people, it means an assembly called together for a religious purpose, which thus belongs to God. We use “church” to designate the religious assembly on the parish level, the diocese (a “particular” Church), and the whole community of believers in communion with the Holy See (the “universal” Church). Church buildings, on the other hand, are the most common type of sacred places. They are physical locations that are set aside for divine worship and dedicated to the liturgy.

A. What Do We Mean by “Church”?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains why we call ourselves the “Church” in our profession of faith:

The word “Church” (Latin *ecclesia*, from the Greek *ek-ka-lein*, to “call out of”) means a convocation or an assembly. It designates the assemblies of the people, usually for a religious purpose. *Ekklesia* is used frequently in the Greek Old Testament for the assembly of the Chosen People before God, above all for their assembly on Mount Sinai where Israel received the Law and was established by God as his holy people. By calling itself “Church,” the first community of Christian believers recognized itself as heir to that assembly. In the Church, God is “calling together” his people from all the ends of the earth. The equivalent Greek term *Kyriake*, from which the English word Church and the German *Kirche* are derived, means “what belongs to the Lord.” (no. 751)

Three elements, then, are fundamental to our understanding of Church: (1) the assembly of the people, who are called together; (2) the religious purpose for which they are called together; and (3) the belongingness of that assembly to the Lord, especially because it is him who calls his people together – as on Mount Sinai.

The next paragraph in the *Catechism* explains that the word “church” signifies different, but related, Christian communities on three levels:

In Christian usage, the word “church” designates the liturgical assembly, but also the local community, or the whole universal community of believers. These three meanings are inseparable. “The Church” is the people that God gathers in the whole world. She exists in local communities and is made real as a liturgical, above all a Eucharistic, assembly. She draws her life from the Word and the body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ’s Body. (no. 752)

The word “church” can mean the liturgical assembly at the parish level – the community of Christian faithful gathered around their pastor for the Eucharistic sacrifice. It also designates the local Christian community, or diocese. These local congregations of the faithful are called Churches in the New Testament, “for in their locality, these are a new people called by God, in the Holy Spirit and in much fullness” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 26). Finally, the word “church” applies to “the whole universal community of believers,” the entire Catholic Church in communion with the Church of Rome. This is the “catholic” or “universal” Church in which Christ is present and which is sent by him on a mission to extend his salvation to the whole human race (CCC, nos. 830-831). The diocese is called a “particular” Church because “the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative” in

the local Christian community, “in communion of faith and sacraments with their bishop ordained in apostolic succession” (*Christus Dominus*, no. 11; CCC, no. 833).

The same word used to signify Christian communities on different levels is also extended to the place where they worship. According to the Navarre commentary on canon law, “The Latin name *ecclesia* was adopted in the first centuries of Christianity. It initially referred to the community of the faithful and later to the place itself where they gathered to listen to the divine Word, to celebrate the Eucharist, and to receive the sacraments” (*Code of Canon Law Annotated*, commentary on c. 1214, p. 1808). The extended meaning of the word retains its former sense of religious purpose and belongingness to God: A church building is set aside for divine worship, and therefore it belongs to God.

B. The Church Building in Canon Law

When the word “church” signifies the church building, canon law defines it this way:

By the term church is understood a sacred building designated for divine worship to which the faithful have the right of entry for the exercise, especially the public exercise, of divine worship. (c. 1214)

The church building falls into the genus of sacred places. A sacred place, according to canon law, is “designated for divine worship or for the burial of the faithful by a dedication or a blessing which the liturgical books prescribe for this purpose” (c. 1205). Sacred places are physical places or locations set aside for worship and dedicated to the liturgy. They include not only church buildings, but oratories, private chapels, and shrines.

A church building is different from these other sacred places in that “the faithful have the right of entry for the exercise . . . of divine worship.” All the Christian faithful have the right to go to a church. Other sacred places are reserved for certain groups of people. Oratories, for example, are reserved for that community or group of people for which they have been established, such as a religious community, residents of a nursing home, or university students. Others may have access to it only with the permission of the authority who oversees it (c. 1223). Similarly, private chapels are intended for the use of one or more physical persons, for whom they are established (c. 1226).

Churches and other sacred places are special. Unlike a gymnasium or a social hall that may occasionally be used for divine worship, these buildings have been permanently withdrawn from secular use. According to Father Nicholas Schöch,

A church is at the same time a building for divine worship and for the assembly of the community, a visible sign of Christian identity, a home for the faithful, a building of art and history. According to canon law, only those buildings are called “*ecclesiae*” which have been *permanently set aside for divine worship* and are accessible to the faithful, especially for the celebration of the Eucharist as the highest form of Christian liturgy. (Nicholas Schöch, OFM, “Relegation of Churches to Profane Use (C. 1222, §2): Reasons and Procedure,” in *The Jurist* 67 (2007): p. 485; emphasis added)

Churches become sacred places either through the solemn rite of dedication using chrism or through the rite of blessing. Both rites are contained in the *Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar*. One of these rites is to be conducted as soon as possible after the construction of the building has been completed (c. 1217 §1). Each church is also to have its own name or title, which cannot be changed once it has been dedicated (c. 1218).

C. The Church Building and the Parish

The distinction between the church and the parish can be confusing. We often refer to the parish by calling it a church: The parish of St. Mary's is "St. Mary's Church." This could be because we have the assembly of the Christian community of that parish in mind. It might also be because in our experience, each parish has one and only one church building. As explained above, we have extended the meaning of our word for the assembly of the faithful worshipping at a certain place to the place itself.

It is very important to distinguish between the two, especially when "church" means the building. A parish can exist without a church. For example, when a tornado destroyed the church belonging to St. Peter's Parish in St. Peter in 1998, the congregation was without a church of their own until they could build a new one. Not all churches are associated with parishes, either. A religious community could have a church primarily for use by its own members. Non-parish churches can also be found at shrines, to which members of the faithful make pilgrimage for special reasons of piety (c. 1230).

We usually find that the name of the parish and the name of the church are the same. People know what we are talking about whether we say the "Parish of St. Joseph" or the "Church of St. Joseph." However, it is possible for the parish and the church to have different names. This could happen because church buildings ordinarily retain the titles they have been given. In the event that a new parish is formed from two or more parishes, the new community might be given a new name. Then, for example, we could speak of the "Church of St. Joseph at the Parish of Christ the King."

CHAPTER 5. THE SMALL PARISH

To account for the differences among parishes that are important in pastoral planning, the diocese has developed a Parish Vitality Index. The components of this index were taken from the criteria used to identify small parishes and oratories in the Third Plan for Parishes. All parishes will now receive a PVI score. Under the current plan, those parishes whose scores fall into the lowest twenty-five percent of all parishes in the diocese are considered small parishes. This plan calls on pastoral leaders, parish leaders, and parishioners at these small parishes especially to enter into a dialogue with each other and with diocesan planning personnel to discern the future of the parish.

A. The Parish Vitality Index

The *Third Plan for Parishes* designated thirteen parishes as “small parishes,” in addition to the ten that it designated as oratories. Small parishes were given their name simply out of a desire to “recognize the differences which exist among parishes because of their size” (p. 17). Unlike oratories, no change in parish structure or operations was envisioned for small parishes. Since the current plan substantially reduces the role of the oratory, its focus shifts to the small parish for considering important modifications in pastoral services.

In determining which parishes should be designated small parishes and which should be designated oratories, the *Third Plan* took into account various factors. These factors included parish size in terms of households and parishioners, professional staff size, enrollment in the religious education program, and some aspects of the parish budget. In the fall of 2011, the Committee on Parishes reviewed these criteria closely. They decided to incorporate them into an index, much like the School Viability Index that had been developed for schools in the most recent *Plan for Catholic Schools*. This index could then apply to all the parishes in the diocese.

The current plan’s new Parish Vitality Index communicates the fact that certain characteristics are vital to a parish organization. In other words, they are “essential to the existence or continuance of” the parish (*Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed., s.v. “vital”). They contribute to the power of the institution to endure or survive (*Webster’s Dictionary*, s.v. “vitality”). These component characteristics, with their corresponding maximum values, are the following:

1. **Households** – The number of households in the parish, divided by 50. Maximum points: 20.
2. **Parishioners** – The number of parishioners in the parish, divided by 100. Maximum points: 20.
3. **Sacramental Life** – The total number of (1) Baptisms, (2) people entering into full communion with the Catholic Church through the RCIA program, (3) Confirmations, and (4) weddings in the parish, divided by five. Maximum points: 16.
4. **Professional FTE** – The total full-time equivalency of all pastoral leader positions plus the full-time equivalency of all other professional parish staff positions, multiplied by two. Maximum points: 12.
5. **Youth Ages 0-18** – The total number of youth in the parish from birth up to age 18, divided by 50. Maximum points: 10.

6. **Religious Education** – The total number of youth receiving religious education in or from the parish, divided by 50. This includes students in Catholic schools and religious education programs, and those receiving instruction at home. For Catholic schools and religious education programs, those students from the parish attending in other parishes are counted, as well as those students from other parishes attending in the parish. Maximum points: 10.
7. **Parish Revenues** – The total amount of parish revenue, divided by 100,000. This includes Sunday offertory, Diocesan Ministry Appeal collections in excess of the parish goal, special collections, Universal Church collections, and all other sources of revenue. In future years, capital campaign contributions for the parish will also be included here. Maximum points: 4.
8. **Parish Savings** – The total amount of parish savings, divided by 150,000. This includes cash, checking accounts, savings accounts, certificates of deposit, and all investment accounts including endowment funds. Maximum points: 4.
9. **Maintenance and Utilities** – Forty percent minus the average percentage of total expenses that the parish spent on maintenance and utilities over the last five years, multiplied by 20. Maximum points: 4.

By adding up the maximum values, one can see that the highest score a parish can achieve is 100 points. In general, the index places the greatest emphasis on the population of the parish (households, parishioners, youth), followed by sacraments and programming. Financial considerations receive the least weight.

B. Understanding the PVI

Each parish's overall PVI score is shown on Figure 4.1. The scores were calculated based on numbers for each component submitted by each parish in the annual 2012 self study and in their annual 2012 financial reports. Figure 4.2 displays these same scores on a map of the diocese. When looking at the figures, please keep the following points in mind about the PVI:

1. **A Comparative Index** – In quantifying certain key characteristics of parishes and summing up the individual scores, the index provides a means of comparing one parish with other parishes. There is no minimum score that a parish must attain in order to “pass,” or below which it should necessarily cease to be a parish. However, pastoral leaders and pastoral planning personnel will increasingly employ these scores to recommend which parishes need to have conversations about their futures.
2. **Use of the One-Hundred-Point Scale** – The purpose of adopting a total possible score of 100 points was *not* to say that any parish below, say, 60 points, “flunks” the test. On the contrary, we found it necessary to make enough points available overall so that meaningful differences among parishes in the various categories could be measured and compared.
3. **Use of Formulas for Vitality Criteria** – The PVI is calculated in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet using data from the diocese's annual self study and parishes' annual financial reports. Simple formulas make these calculations easy to implement. They also permit results in fractions of a point. This is favorable to parishes that do not achieve the maximum point total in some of the categories. Fractions of a point in multiple categories added together contribute to higher total scores.

4. **Principles for the Inclusion of Criteria** – In almost all instances, the Committee on Parishes took the criteria that constitute the components of the index from the criteria for small parishes and oratories in the *Third Plan for Parishes*. They have been weighted according to analysis and discussion of several charts applying these criteria to the diocese’s twenty-eight smallest parishes. It is particularly important to note here possible criteria that are not currently part of the index: vocations, average Mass attendance (either as the number of people or a percentage of total parishioners), church seating capacity, and driving distance to the nearest church.
5. **Interpreting Total Scores** – Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of the index is that it allows us group parishes by their total scores, providing a better understanding of their relative sizes. Almost two-thirds of our parishes have scores of 30 or below, demonstrating just how small most of our parishes really are. Of these, eight are below 10 and twenty nine more are between 10 and 20. By contrast, nine parishes scored in the 80s and 90s. Another four scored in the 60s, with an additional seven scoring in the 40s and 50s.

C. What is a Small Parish?

For purposes of this current *Plan for Parishes*, a small parish is one of those parishes in the leftmost column of Figure 4.1. These twenty-five percent of the diocese’s parishes (nineteen parishes out of seventy-six) have the lowest scores on the PVI.

This plan calls on pastoral leaders, parish leaders, and parishioners at these small parishes especially to enter into a dialogue with each other and with diocesan planning personnel to discern the future of the parish. In many instances, the parish will ultimately be merged with a neighboring parish. That is to say, if current demographic and financial trends at the parish continue, a merger will be the anticipated result. This does not necessarily mean that the associated church building will close or that a weekend Mass will no longer be celebrated in that church.

Other parishes are not immune from these discussions, either. The second column in Figure 4.1 lists another nineteen parishes that are within about six points of the top score among the lowest twenty-five percent. These parishes would also have good reason to reflect collectively on their futures. While larger parishes rank higher in terms of their vitality, they could easily become the destination parish for a merged parish. By assessing the number of weekend Masses they really need and identifying parish programs that could be raised to the level of the AFC, they can provide a valuable service in furthering the goals of pastoral planning.

The discernment at the small parish will occur primarily through a number of discussions between pastoral leaders and the faithful. At key points, diocesan planning personnel will make presentations to the parish administrative council and to parishioners, providing information that will further the conversation. In this process, it will be critically important to bear in mind not only the desires of parishioners, but also the needs of the diocese. For more details on this process, please see the chapter on Consultation and Implementation in Section 5.

D. Why Small Parishes are More Subject to Modification

Typically, parishioners in small parishes are more connected with each other than those in larger parishes. There is a greater tendency to participate in the life of the parish, to volunteer for various ministries, and to support the parish financially. Oftentimes, the relationships forged among the families in small parishes go back generations. A strong sense of community pervades their gathering for worship, fellowship, and

service. The strong relationships that unite the community help explain why altering the parish is so painful for so many parishioners.

On the other hand, large parishes typically have more people attend their Masses and larger worship spaces. The very fact that they have more members is often because they are located in a bigger population center. With more people to draw from, they are more likely to recruit well-qualified people for various ministries, such as their directors of music and religious education. Since they have more financial resources, they are more likely to use employees as opposed to volunteers to carry out the work of the Church. The numbers of those who actively participate in the life of the parish are as high as or higher than that of a typical small parish. Yet a higher percentage of people don't participate at all.

People sometimes make the argument that small parishes are just as viable as larger ones because their membership is more committed and active. Therefore, their claim to priests in the context of a decline in the number of priests is just as strong as that of larger parishes. This, however, cannot be the case. If a smaller parish has a lower seating capacity, having Mass celebrated there as opposed to a larger parish would result in more Masses having to be said. Furthermore, if the small parish is located outside a population center, having Mass celebrated there as opposed to a larger parish would require that a greater number of people travel a greater distance.

Regrettably, in the context of a decline in the number of priests, it is inescapable that the planning process will adversely affect the worship habits and the faith experience of some people, at least initially. Understandably, the bishop, diocesan planning personnel, and pastoral leaders want to minimize the unfavorable impact of the decisions they have to make. This almost inevitably means that they will choose smaller parishes over larger ones for important modifications.

CHAPTER 6. OPTIONS FOR SMALL PARISHES

While all parishes in the diocese will see changes as the number of priests declines, small parishes are especially subject to major modifications. For some, Mass might only be celebrated at their church every other weekend. Other small parishes might be combined with another parish or parishes in the area. In a parish merger, the church building of a merged parish becomes the property of its designated or destination parish. Typically, these buildings remain open for divine worship and other religious activities. A church building should only be closed when it becomes unusable, when the funds cannot be found to keep it in use, or when a combination of factors arise that together demonstrate the great importance of closing it.

A. Introduction

Change is seldom easy. It can be difficult when it involves a faith community that we hold very dear, such as our parish. It can be especially difficult when it involves a church building that has become so familiar and important in our lives over so many years. Both are often intimately tied to one's town, one's family, and their respective histories. Perhaps one's grandparents were among the founding members of the parish. Perhaps it was through parish events that a person met a spouse or best friend. Perhaps the church building is where mom and dad got married, or where their funeral Mass was celebrated. Perhaps the parish and its church are the center of life for a rural community, which has already witnessed the closure of so many other institutions.

The process of discernment that small parishes are to undertake first involves a prayerful examination of their pastoral activities. How are we being nourished by the Word of God, the Eucharist, and the other sacraments? How are we communicating the life of Christ to others? Are we living out our Christian vocation to imitate Christ in his offices of priest, prophet, and king as we should through participation in the parish? Is our parish as vibrant as it once was? Can we reasonably expect it to have our current level of activity in the future, given the area's demographic trends? (For more on demographic trends in the diocese, please see Section 3 of this plan, and especially Chapter 2 on Population Projections.)

Many of the shortfalls that small parishes experience in their pastoral services can be met by the area faith community. Indeed, this is what the area faith community is for. However, there comes a point when this collaboration is not enough. The declining numbers of individual members, households, and youth in the parish could well mean the loss of some of a priest's services – including for Sunday Mass. The declining number of priests and the expectation that they should celebrate only a limited number of Sunday Masses on a weekend (*Code of Canon Law*, c. 905 §2) entail that certain small parishes will only be able to celebrate Mass at their church every other weekend. The limited availability of a priest may translate into further reductions in the sacraments and other pastoral activities. (For more on the declining numbers of priests, please see the second chapter of Section 5 of this *Plan*; for more on the number of weekend Masses that priests can celebrate, see Chapter 4 of that section.)

Since the parish is fundamentally a Eucharistic community, a Sunday liturgy should not be celebrated less than every other weekend. When a parish's demographic indicators have declined to the point that it cannot justify a priest even for a Mass every other weekend, further change is in order. This change will consist of a merger. The parish will be united with another parish or parishes in the area. In many cases, the parish in the area that will serve as the designated or receiving parish will be obvious. Parish leaders of a small parish can also recommend the designated parish that they prefer. However, the ultimate decision rests with the bishop.

Once the merger has taken place, the church building of the merged parish becomes the property of the designated parish. The receiving parish is responsible for its ongoing upkeep, perhaps with the help of proceeds from a designated fund set up for this purpose. The parish is expected to commit the resources to the building, even if it could get by without it. Worship, catechesis, and outreach efforts can continue at the site as before. There may come a time, however, when the unified parish can no longer afford to maintain two or more church buildings. At that time, it could petition the diocese to have one of its church buildings torn down or relegated to secular use.

The options for altering a parish through a merger or in some other way and the options for closing a church building are spelled out in the *Code of Canon Law*. The procedures involved in each are similar but must be kept separate, even though in many dioceses the decisions to merge a parish and to close a church building are made together. In each case, the bishop must hear those who have rights in the matter, consult with the presbyteral council (the Priests' Council in the Diocese of New Ulm), and issue a decree explaining his decision. If the bishop makes one decision on a parish merger and another decision on the closing of a church, these should be expressed in two separate decrees.

B. The Merger: Uniting Two or More Parishes

The *Code of Canon Law* states that the diocesan bishop alone has the responsibility for creating, closing, and making important modifications to parishes: "It is only for the diocesan bishop to erect, suppress, or alter parishes" (c. 515 §2). One important way that he can alter a parish is to unite it with another. This can happen in two ways:

1. **Consolidation** – In this type of union, two or more parishes are joined in a way that each loses its own identity and a new parish, with its own unique legal identity, is constituted in their stead. The designated parish is a new entity with a new name. For example, St. Jerome Parish and St. Philomena Parish combine to form Good Shepherd Parish. St. Jerome's and St. Philomena's cease to exist as formal entities. However, if St. Jerome Parish has a church dedicated to St. Jerome, the church retains its title. It becomes St. Jerome Church at Good Shepherd Parish.
2. **Amalgamation** – In this type of union, one or more parishes are absorbed or assimilated into another parish. This destination or designated parish retains its identity and name, while the merging parishes lose their legal identities. For example, St. Joseph Parish is amalgamated into St. Michael Parish. Following the merger, St. Joseph's no longer enjoys existence as a separate parish. However, if its church was dedicated to St. Joseph, it retains its title and becomes St. Joseph Church at St. Michael Parish.

Clearly, both these types of union go beyond what is called for in a cluster or area faith community. When a parish becomes a part of an area faith community, it retains its own identity. It shares many pastoral initiatives and activities with the larger group, while maintaining a set of operations that pertains specifically to the parish. In a union or merger, all its operations are integrated into the larger whole. Its church building and cemetery will be maintained, and perhaps there will still be an annual festival associated with the church. All these things, however, will be carried out under the auspices of the designated parish.

It should be noted that the terminology employed here is somewhat arbitrary; different commentators on canon law will use different terms for different types of unions. In particular, the word "merge" in English first means "to lose or cause to lose identity by being absorbed, swallowed up, or combined." However, its second meaning is "to join together; unite, combine" (*Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed., s.v. "merge"). Due to its capacity to signify combining in general, we will use "merge"

synonymously with “unite” and “join.” A merger, then, signifies any sort of union, while an amalgamation specifically signifies that type of merger where one entity is absorbed into another, whose identity is preserved throughout the change.

When considering a parish or parishes in their area for merger, the pastor and other pastoral leaders should discern which type of union would be best in their particular circumstances. There may be good reasons for choosing one type over the other. As noted above, the opportunity for a larger, receiving parish to retain its name and identity is an important consideration. This favors the amalgamation. Another consideration is fairness. If the parishes being united are all of similar size, perhaps a union should be considered that treats all parishes equally. This approach would favor the consolidation.

Canon 121 in the *Code of Canon Law* applies to consolidations of juridic persons, including parishes. A juridic person in canon law is an artificial person constituted by a competent ecclesiastical authority (such as a diocesan bishop) for some apostolic purpose in the Church. Juridic persons are subjects of rights and obligations corresponding to their nature in canon law. For example, they can own property and enter into contracts. In this way, they are analogous to corporations in American law, which as legal persons are the subjects of rights and obligations. Besides parishes, examples of juridic persons under canon law include dioceses, episcopal conferences, institutes of consecrated life, associations of the faithful, and seminaries.

A 2006 letter from the head of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Clergy to the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops clarified that canon 121 also applies to amalgamations. In either type of merger, the goods and patrimonial rights of the merged parish are assumed by the designated parish. Any obligations, financial or otherwise, are assumed as well. Accordingly, the designated parish receives the territory, church building, cemetery, and financial assets of the merged parish. While the parishioners of the merged parish are encouraged to begin attending the designated parish, they are free to register at the parish of their choosing. These choices do not affect the destination of the assets of the merged parish.

C. Profile of a Merger

A merger among parishes can occur for several reasons. Sometimes, through a prayerful reflection about their parish’s current level of pastoral activity and its expected future, parish leaders and parishioners will come to the conclusion that the parish is no longer sustainable. At other times, the lack of priests in the diocese entails that some small parishes will no longer enjoy even a biweekly Sunday Mass, with no reasonable prospects that the situation will be remedied in the future. At still other times, a combination of these factors will lead pastoral leaders and the faithful to the conclusion that a merger is in order. Whatever the situation, concern for the salvation of souls should always be the overriding factor (*Christus Dominus*, no. 32).

While this profile focuses on the canonical and operational aspects of a merger, we cannot forget the importance of the community aspect. Just because the merger is legal and people understand how to execute a new set of procedures does not mean that everyone will be content with the new organization. The connections that people have to their old parish have been forged over many years; it will take time for these relationships to grow in new directions. Sensitivity to the difficulties that parishioners have with change and a concerted effort to involve them in the process will do much to help them embrace a new experience of parish life.

A merger or union of parishes in the diocese will have the following characteristics:

1. **Procedure** – The bishop ultimately makes the decision to merge a parish. Before he does so, he will consult with the pastor (or other pastoral leader) of the parish. These leaders will have already discussed the matter with parish staff, leadership, and parishioners. At some point, diocesan pastoral planning personnel will talk with the staff and lay leaders in the parish, and perhaps parishioners too. These groups will be given the opportunity to voice their opinions. If there are any parties whose rights could be injured by the decision, these people will also be heard (*Code of Canon Law*, c. 50). Finally, the bishop will also consult the Priests' Council about the move (c. 515 §2). If, having collected all the necessary information and consulted all the appropriate people, the bishop decides to move forward with the merger, he will issue a decree. Issued in written form, this decree establishes his decision in law and provides at least summarily the reasons he has for it (c. 51). For more information about how this process will unfold in a typical merger, please see Chapter 4 on Consultation and Implementation in Section 5.
2. **Designated Parish** – Wherever possible, parishes will be merged with others in their own area faith community. Since all the parishes in the diocese are territorial, all the territory of the designated parish that results from the merger should be contiguous. Consideration should also be given to the geographical proximity of the churches of the parishes to be merged and the relationships that already exist between the parish communities. Finally, preference for a designated parish should be given to a parish with a large seating capacity to accommodate major liturgical celebrations, such as the Easter Triduum and the Sacrament of Confirmation.
3. **Church Building** – In a merger, the church building becomes the property of the designated parish. The designated parish receives the assets of the merged parish and the obligation for the ongoing care of its church building. The pastor is encouraged to set up a fund specifically for the maintenance of the building, which will invite donations especially from former parishioners of the merged parish. This fund could be established with the remaining savings from the merged parish. The pastor could also establish a subcommittee of the administrative council to look after the upkeep of the building.
4. **Cemetery** – Cemetery funds are to be transferred to the designated parish and retained in a separate account for its care. Like the church building, the operation and maintenance of the cemetery becomes the responsibility of the designated parish. The pastor is ultimately responsible for making sure that the proper administrative structures are established to see to its proper care.
5. **Celebration of Sacraments** – Weekend Masses at the church building of the merged parish can continue as previously, provided the pastor of the designated parish finds the schedule acceptable. Masses on at least one weekday and on feast days proper to the church building should still be celebrated. Special Masses and other sacraments are to be treated as follows:
 - a. **Baptisms** – Canon law states that an adult is to be baptized in his or her parish church and an infant in the parish church of the parents unless there is good reason to do otherwise (c. 857). Adult baptisms will ordinarily occur in the church of the parish within the area where the Easter Vigil is celebrated. For a good reason, the pastor may permit infant baptisms in the church building of a merged parish. These buildings may retain their baptismal fonts for this purpose.
 - b. **Confirmation** – The diocesan bishop ordinarily confers this sacrament upon youth. Confirmation is usually a celebration of the area faith community; area pastoral leaders determine its place in consultation with the Bishop's Office. Adult confirmations will ordinarily occur at the Easter Vigil in one of the churches within the area. However, they can also take place at other times. Canon law does not prohibit a church building other than a parish church to be used for Confirmation.

- c. **First Communion** – The Eucharist should be celebrated in a sacred place, unless in a particular case necessity requires otherwise (c. 932). Accordingly, pastors may determine at which church or churches in their parishes the celebration of First Communion will take place.
 - d. **Funerals** – Funerals can be celebrated in the church building of a merged parish with the consent of the pastor. Canon law states that funerals should generally be celebrated in the parish church of the deceased (c. 1177 §1). However, they or those persons in charge of their funeral arrangements can request that the funeral take place in another church (c. 1177 §2).
 - e. **Weddings** – Weddings are permitted in the church building of a merged parish with the permission of the pastor or the bishop. Canon law states that weddings should generally be celebrated in the parish church of one of the spouses when the marriage is between Catholics or between a Catholic party and a non-Catholic baptized party. (c. 1118). However, the couple can request that the ceremony take place in another church.
6. **Other Uses for the Church** – All forms of divine worship, including the Liturgy of the Hours, devotions, and other forms of communal and private worship are encouraged in the church building. Other activities and programs may be conducted in the building as determined by the pastor in consultation with the Administrative Council and other pastoral leaders in the area faith community.
 7. **Title of the Church** – Canon 1218 states that the title of a church cannot be changed once the church has been dedicated. Such a change could only occur for grave reasons and with an indult of the Apostolic See. If a church has only been blessed, the diocesan bishop can change its title for a grave reason, after carefully considering all the circumstances. The titles of parishes almost always follow the titles of their churches. However, there are no norms in canon law for the names of parishes. If a consolidation involves all the parishes in an area faith community, the new parish could take the name of the AFC.
 8. **Civil Corporation** – The civil corporation of the merged parish is dissolved. In civil law as well as canon law, the assets and liabilities of the merged parish are inherited by the designated parish.
 9. **Finances** – The accounts associated with the maintenance of the church building and the cemetery of the merged parish are part of the accounting system of the designated parish. Provisions for these items are part of the designated parish’s annual budget. There is no separate Administrative Council to look after those things previously belonging to the merged parish.
 10. **Administrative Council** – The Administrative Council of the designated parish should be expanded or reconstituted to include membership from each former parish. While pastoral leaders can decide how best to do this in their particular circumstances, the most straightforward way would be to implement a proportional representation, according to the membership of each parish before the merger. This arrangement should stay in place for several years, until pastoral leaders determine that it is no longer necessary.
 11. **Endowments** – Endowment funds may be established to provide for the ongoing care of a merged parish’s church building. Gifts or bequests should be made with the condition that, if the church building becomes impractical to sustain financially, any remaining monies could (1) be applied to the final disposition of the building, or (2) revert to the general fund of the designated parish.

D. Dividing a Parish

One would expect the division of a parish into two or more parishes to be the result of expansion. For example, in 1911 Bishop John Ireland of the then-Diocese of St. Paul determined that Holy Trinity Parish (the future cathedral) in New Ulm had grown too large. He established the Church of St. Mary as an offshoot for Catholics on the city's south side.

However, the division of a parish can also take place as a prelude to a number of mergers. In that case, the territory of the parish is reallocated among pre-existing or newly created parishes, depending on the type of merger. Pursuant to canon 122, a share of the patrimony and obligations of the parish to be divided would be allocated to the designated parishes in proportion to the territory that they receive or the pastoral responsibilities they assume.

In the current circumstances of the Diocese of New Ulm, such a scenario is possible, albeit unlikely. The chief question would be what to do with the divided parish's church building. If the building had been destroyed by natural disaster or relegated to secular use, the division would be more straightforward; the proportion could be a function of the number of parishioners joining two or more neighboring parishes. If the church building is still functional, a greater proportion of the patrimony should be allocated to the designated parish that receives its territory and will assume its care.

E. Closing the Church

One of the characteristics that typifies good church architecture is permanence. A church building is a "House of God," a sacred place designed to further the mission of Jesus Christ. This mission to establish his Kingdom on earth is carried on from one generation to the next, until the end of time. The *Dedication of a Church and an Altar* states that "Because the church is a visible building, it stands as a special sign of the pilgrim Church on earth and reflects the Church dwelling in heaven." It adds, "When a church is erected as a building destined solely and permanently for assembling the People of God and for carrying out sacred functions, it is fitting that it be dedicated to God with a solemn rite, in accordance with the ancient custom of the Church" (Chapter 2, no. 2).

The permanence of church buildings arises from their physical attributes. Church buildings tend to have a firm foundation, a well designed structure, and a significant mass, and they are typically composed of very durable building materials. Paradigmatic of this tendency are the great, awe-inspiring, gothic cathedrals of Europe, many of which were constructed in the Middle Ages and are still in use today. Even the churches in the Diocese of New Ulm, though much lesser in size and scope, were intended by their builders to last for generations.

The sense of permanence attached to church buildings – and especially their aptitude to signify the Church universal – provides an insight into why canon law takes closing them so seriously:

If a church cannot be used in any way for divine worship and there is no possibility of repairing it, the diocesan bishop can relegate it to profane but not sordid use. (c. 1222 §1)

Where other grave causes suggest that a church no longer be used for divine worship, the diocesan bishop, after having heard the presbyteral council, can relegate it to profane but not sordid use, with the consent of those who legitimately claim rights for themselves in the church and provided that the good of souls suffers no detriment thereby. (c. 1222 §2)

The case for closing a church building must be stronger than that for merging a parish. To merge a parish, the diocesan bishop needs a “just cause” or “good reason.” He must always have in mind the good of souls; his decision cannot be arbitrary. To close a church building, he needs a “grave cause” or serious reason. This is usually a set of circumstances that add up to the church being unsustainable. The fact that a parish has been merged and the new parish does not really need the church building is in itself not sufficient. Neither is a shortage of priests or a dwindling number of the faithful to worship in the facility.

A declining number of parishioners can play an important role in the closure of a church, insofar as the building depends on them to support financially its ongoing repair and maintenance. A lack of financial means to preserve a church that is falling into disrepair is perhaps the most frequent reason for wanting to close it. If a parish community cannot provide this support without seriously compromising its ministries and funds cannot be raised from other sources, it creates a good case for closing a building that is not the parish church.

The technical language for “closing a church” in canon law is “relegating it to profane but not sordid use.” What does this mean? A profane or secular use would be some use other than sacred worship. A former church building could be used as a library, a recreational center, or even a convenience store. At the same time, a religious group other than a Catholic parish could purchase the building for their own worship services. Sordid or unbecoming use involves activities that would cause a violation of Catholic faith and morals. A church building, for example, could not be sold with the suspicion that the new owners were going to convert it into an adult bookstore.

As with the merger of parishes, the competent ecclesiastical authority for relegating a church to secular use is the diocesan bishop. If the church has been damaged to such an extent that it is physically or financially impossible to repair it, he may issue a decree immediately. If not, he must consult the presbyteral council. He must also obtain the consent of the pastor of the church, and anyone else who could claim a right in the church. This could happen, for example, if a person other than the parish owned the land, or if a major donor made a contribution on condition that the church would continue to be used as a sacred place for some period of time.