



**ARCHDIOCESE OF PHILADELPHIA
PARISH MERGERS**

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OVERVIEW

In a parish merger, two or more parishes are united as one parish. Parishes may be considered for a merger when one or more of the parishes involved appears to lack the resources for long term sustainability.

It is understandably difficult for parishioners, clergy, and parish staff when a parish, often one with a long and cherished history, is merged into another parish. This step is never taken lightly. Yet, it sometimes becomes necessary to merge a parish when it does not appear capable of sustaining itself in the long term. This is done to ensure that future generations have the benefit of stronger and more vibrant parishes.

It is hoped that by merging two or more parishes they will have the temporal resources and a sufficient number of parishioners to engage in evangelization and other activities that the parishes working alone may not be able to accomplish. Merged together they also should be more financially efficient. By combining staff and by making better use of property, the merged parish can operate more efficiently and cost effectively. In addition, merged parishes make better use of the limited number of clergy available to serve as pastors.

All assets and liabilities of the parishes involved go to the newly merged parish. While one church will serve as the parish church, other churches in the parish will continue in use as worship sites. (See “Churches other than the parish church” below.) The name of the parish will remain the same as the name of the parish church.

***“Do not be afraid. . . .
Put out into the deep
and let down your nets for a catch!”
- Saint John Paul II***

CONSIDERATIONS IN SELECTING PARISHES FOR A MERGER

The merging of parishes will have to be considered when a parish lacks the resources for long term viability. Some of the elements that will be considered as elements of long-term viability include: the ability to meet current financial obligations with current income; having a sufficient number of active parishioners to engage effectively in the mission of the Church; continuing (in the case of personal parishes) to serve the purpose for which the parish was founded; the proximity of other parishes – such that the area served by the parishes is reasonably able to support the number of parishes without undermining one another; having clergy and staff available to serve the pastoral needs of the parish; and having buildings and other property in good repair to serve the requirements of the parish.

Of necessity, stable parishes that neighbor the parish with sustainability issues will sometimes have to be brought into the merger to receive the community and resources from that parish.

In selecting which particular parishes should be merged consideration will be given to factors such as the long term sustainability of the newly merged parish; the location of the parish church relative to population of the newly merged parish; the ability of the facilities of the newly merged parish to serve the needs of the merged parish community; and a history of cooperation between the parishes being merged.

THE NEED FOR PARISH MERGERS

Parish Mergers Help Address Two Difficulties

Parish Mergers are difficult but they are sometimes necessary to help address two pressing difficulties parishes face in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia:

1. Parishes that do not have Enough Active Parishioners and/or the Financial Resources to Sustain themselves in the Long Term.

Parishes that have few remaining parishioners are often unable to continue all of the functions that make for a vibrant parish. They sometimes do not have enough people or other resources to engage, for example, in effective outreach to non-practicing Catholics and to non-Catholics. Too often their resources are focused solely on serving those Catholics who are already active in the parish. In addition some parishes are routinely unable to obtain the annual income needed to meet regular operating expenses. Often there are deferred maintenance costs that the parish can no longer afford to cover. The merged resources of parishes can enable them to form parish organizations, have parish programs, and engage in outreach in ways that each parish, working alone, would not have been able to accomplish. The merged operation of the parish can help save on expenses and may free up property for rental or sale.

2. The Limited Number of Priests we have Available to Serve as Pastors

Over the last ten years the number of archdiocesan priests in active ministry declined by 28%. The average age of our priests is increasing. Not every priest has the talents needed to serve as a pastor. While we are hopeful about increased vocations in years to come, we still must address our needs now and in the years immediately ahead. Parish Mergers will allow a pastor, with the help of the parish staff and active parishioners, to shepherd the larger parish community of the merged parish.

PARISH ASSETS AND LIABILITIES

All of the assets of the parishes (e.g. savings accounts, real estate, Trusts) will remain with the communities involved and become the property of the newly merged parish. The archdiocese does not take any of the property. Any liabilities (e.g. debts) also become the obligation of the newly merged parish.

CHURCHES OTHER THAN THE PARISH CHURCH (AKA WORSHIP SITE CHURCHES)

One church is designated as the parish church. The church(es) of the other parish(es) involved in the merger will remain open as a worship site.

Worship site churches must be maintained (insofar as parish resources reasonably allow) and opened periodically for use. It is up to the pastor in consultation with the Pastoral Council (and/or Transition Team) to determine which liturgical activities will be permitted in the church. These could include, funerals, weddings, devotions, and possibly a Sunday Mass. Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion, and the Easter Triduum must be held in the parish church, and normally cannot be held in a worship site church.

(In exceptional circumstances a worship site church may have to be closed through the canonical process of “relegation.” This could occur, for example, when the church requires extensive repairs and/or the upkeep costs are so high that the newly merged parish simply cannot afford to cover these expenses without seriously impeding the mission of the parish.)

PROCESS FOR IMPLIMENTATION OF A PARISH MERGER

There are three phases to the implementation of a Parish Merger. While some adaptations may be necessary as circumstances demand, the phases and approximate timeline will be as follows:

	PHASE	STARTING	ENDING
1	EXPLORE candidates for Parish Mergers	September	April
2	PREPARE parishioners, staff, parish councils, clergy, etc.	April	June
3	BEGIN merger of parishes.	July 1	

1. EXPLORE

The Coordinator of Archdiocesan Planning Initiatives gathers initial information and consults with the Moderator of the Curia, the Regional Bishops and the Deans, to identify parishes that are do not appear to be sustainable in the long term. Neighboring parishes into which the parish that does not appear sustainable could be merged will also be identified. The “Criteria for Parishes Involved in Parish Mergers” (see above) should guide these proposals. Pastors are also encouraged to alert their Deans and the Archdiocesan Planning Initiatives Office if they think their parish should be considered.

Parishes proposed for a possible merger are discussed with the Archdiocesan Strategic Planning Committee, the Council of Priests, and the pastors of the parishes under consideration. With the approval of the Archbishop the parishes involved will undergo a period of discussion and study. This study be conducted by a Planning Committee, made up of the pastors and three representatives appointed by the pastor from each parish. A facilitator supplied by the archdiocese will help guide the discussions. Comments and recommendations from the Planning Committee are reviewed by the Archdiocesan Strategic Planning Committee and the Council of Priests before a final proposal is submitted to the Archbishop for consideration.

2. PREPARE

Prayer, Information and Training

During the months leading up the merger a series of informational and training sessions will be held for those most directly involved. All of these sessions will include an important element of prayer and should be supplemented by some joint worship opportunities for the parishioners of the parishes involved. Since we are preparing two communities rooted in

Christ to work together, it is crucial for those communities approach Jesus together in prayer. This also helps lay the groundwork for a joint evangelization effort by the parishes involved.

The training sessions will be organized by the Office for Parish Services and Support, The Office for the New Evangelization, and the Coordinator for Archdiocesan Planning Initiatives.

Parishioners:

During the months prior to the merger the parishioners will be kept informed by regular updates in the parish bulletin. These will include a series of FAQs that will continue to explain the concept of a Parish Merger and will address those specific questions effecting parishioners most directly

Prayers for the success of the partnership should be periodically added to the General Intercessions. Consideration should also be given to conducting some joint worship services (such as Stations of the Cross and Eucharistic Adoration) so that the parish communities that will be working together have a chance to pray together.

Current Clergy, Parish Staff, Pastoral Councils, and Finance Councils:

Special informational and training sessions will be held for clergy, parish staff, parish pastoral councils and parish finance councils of those parishes involved in upcoming Parish Mergers.

Appointment of New Pastor. The appointment of the new pastor will usually be made at the end of May and will go into effect on the date of the merger. Often, the current pastors of the parishes involved in the merger will be transferred and a new pastor will be appointed.

3. BEGIN

The Archdiocesan Office for Parish Services and Support will help the pastor of the newly merged parish form a transition team. This team is made up of parishioners from all of the parishes involved in the merger. The team advises the pastor in uniting the parish communities and helps keep parishioners informed as to what is happening. Some of the topics they will need to consider are the Mass Schedule, use of parish real-estate, combining parish organizations, and the use of worship site churches.

The process of uniting the parish communities cannot be accomplished in just a few weeks, or even months, or perhaps even years. It takes time to work out all of the questions and issues involved. Christian patience and charity is essential.