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Serving the Catholic Community of the Diocese of La Crosse

## Demographics and pastoral planning: Meeting people where they're at

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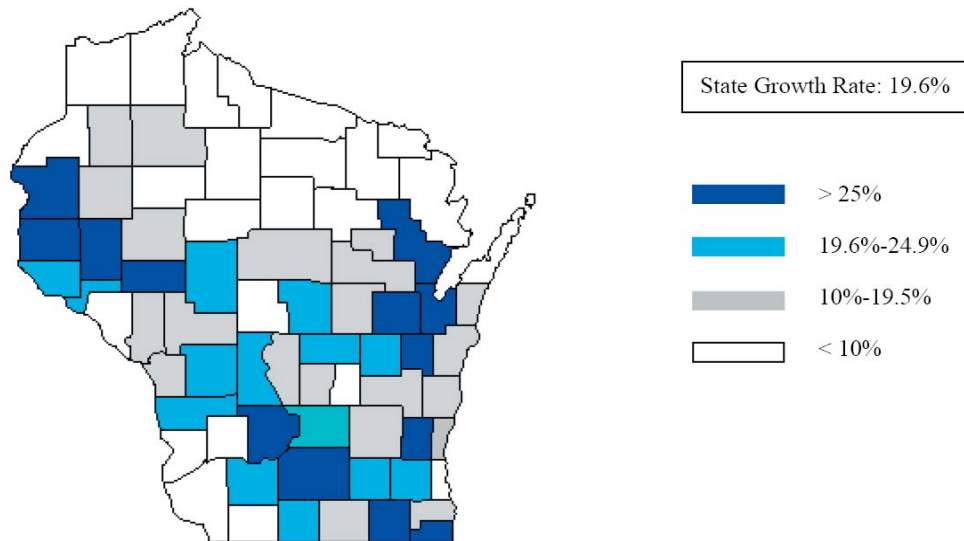
LA CROSSE – While some Masses in the Diocese of La Crosse are sparsely attended, at others you may have a hard time finding a seat. It seems not so much that the diocese has too many churches, but that some of them are in the wrong places.

Along with the worsening priest shortage, population shifts have proved a major concern for the members of the pastoral planning committee set up by Bishop Jerome E. ListECKI in 2005. Charged with finding a way to serve the spiritual needs of the diocese's Catholics even as they move about, the committee examined the State of Wisconsin's demographic projections to ascertain where people are most likely to live over the next 25 years.

According to the Department of Administration's Scott Larrivee, by 2030 there will likely be more people wherever you are in the state. "We're seeing balanced and steady growth throughout the state," Larrivee said. He noted however, that the growth would be far more dramatic in some areas than in others.

"People go where there's economic opportunity and jobs," Larrivee explained. "What you have are major

Figure 3: Wisconsin County Growth Rates, 2000-2030



In planning for the future of the Diocese of La Crosse, the diocesan pastoral planning committee examined Wisconsin's demographic projections to the year 2030. According to these projections, St. Croix County will experience the most growth at 67.9 percent, with its halo effect reaching Dunn and Eau Claire counties. The state Department of Administration's spokesman Scott Larrivee said that, while rural communities will increase very little over the next 25 years, communities along the state's interstate corridors will experience tremendous growth.

transportation corridors that run roughly from the Twin Cities down through Eau Claire and down to Madison. If you take a really abstract and not precise look at it, that's where our population is growing."

The state's most dramatic growth will occur in St. Croix County, Larrivee said, where the population is expected to grow 67.9 percent due to its proximity to the Twin Cities. Experiencing a halo effect due to I-94, Dunn and Eau Claire Counties are both expected to grow by more than 25 percent,

he said.

The dean of the Eau Claire deanery is Father Eugene Klink, pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish. Acknowledging the area's burgeoning population growth, Father Klink said, "There are an awful lot of residential buildings going up."

Even so, Father Klink said, the growth doesn't seem to affect the size of Immaculate Conception, which is in the city itself, as much as the parishes surrounding the city. "Ours has pretty much remained the

same," he said. "Some people come, some people go."

"The growth is mainly to the south of town, and to the west, which is encompassed by St. Raymond (de Peñafort Parish)," he said.

Larrivee said that the growth experienced by suburban parishes like St. Raymond likely results from the younger generation's willingness to commute. "We see growth that is driven by commute times," he said.

He also said that what holds true in Eau Claire may also be

CT/Wisconsin Department of Administration Web site

the case elsewhere in the diocese, where city parishes consistently have older congregations than other, surrounding parishes. "If there's an area where it seems the suburbs are younger and the people living closer to the city itself are older, that may explain shifts that you're seeing," Larrivee said.

While all the diocese's cities will grow, Larrivee said, the rural areas in much of the diocese will likely experience far

less growth. "We can't short-change agriculture," he said. "But when you're just talking large, overall numbers of people, if you had a whole bunch of people living in a rural area, it wouldn't be a rural area any more."

According to Larrivee, having a parish every few miles is not as necessary as it once was. "Distances that people travel, the speed with which we can travel is much different than it

was when you go way back to the early days of the diocese, where people probably didn't travel as much and the roads weren't what they are today," he said.

Whatever the diocese decides, it will have to follow Catholics as they move if it wants to serve their spiritual needs. Demographically speaking, Larrivee said, this means concentrating less on the rural areas and more on the

economic centers.

"There was a time in our country when everybody would have been a farmer," Larrivee said. "Now as our economy grows and diversifies, you have people moving into different career paths, and where those career paths require them to go is a big influence on where they choose to live."