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Pastoral Planning: What Santa Cruz can teach us

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NEKOOSA – In years past, most every parish in the diocese had a resident priest. Those in the larger towns also had assistant priests, and perhaps a convent of nuns to teach in the parochial school.

This has changed dramatically as the number of priests and religious continues to decline to the extent where most parishes now share a priest with at least one other congregation.

It's a troubling fact, to be sure. And it is also the most compelling reason for the diocese's pastoral plan which, if and when it is needed, would drastically reduce the number of parishes in the diocese while keeping all its church buildings open.

However, some pastors are looking for a silver lining in this dark cloud. One of them is Father John Swing, who goes so far as to suggest that "maybe we have had too many priests, and there is no priest shortage at all."

The pastor of two parishes – Sacred Heart of Jesus, Nekooosa, and St. Alexander, Port Edwards – Father Swing has additional duties as dean of the Wisconsin Rapids Deanery. So it's safe to say he's not speaking comfortably from the outside looking in.

Furthermore, Father Swing knows it could be tougher. A lot tougher. He spent 1975-1981 serving the Parroquia de la Santa Cruz, the diocese's



This diagram plots the 10 chapels currently served by the Parroquia de la Santa Cruz, La Crosse's mission parish in Santa Cruz, Bolivia.

mission parish in Santa Cruz Bolivia. Today, La Crosse Diocese priests Fathers Bob Flock and Ed Penchi, with the help of two others, continue to serve the more than 65,000 Catholics who live in proximity to the mission parish's church and 10 chapels.

Father Swing said one of the most valuable lessons he learned there was the value of working together – of collaborating with the laity, and of in-

pressing them to take ownership of their church. "Maybe it's so big that there was no other way," Father Swing said. "No pastor could even begin to micro-manage all that. So maybe it was that way out of necessity, but it did work very well."

Father Swing accompanied Bishop Jerome E. Listeki on his Jan. 15-19 visit to Bolivia. It was the former missionary's first trip back since the early 1980s, and he said he was im-

pressed by the progress current pastor Father Flock has made. "When I was there, most of our activities were under the trees," he said. "Now there are chapels in all those places."

What Father Swing and the bishop witnessed was a parish which still has a priest-to-parishioner ratio of approximately 15,000:1, but which also possesses what Father Swing described as "a trust and a working together, and a

real sense of ownership that's communicated."

Part of the secret, according to Father Flock, has been a pastoral plan which the parish implemented in 2007. The primary objective of that plan? "To be a community of communities, living and sharing the Gospel in the reality of the present day, as disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ, so that our people might have life in Him."

"It's not just the priest who has a mission in the parish," Father Flock explained. "Every baptized person has a mission in the parish, and the mission isn't just showing up on Sunday. It goes beyond that. It's not pay, pray and obey. It's being consciously aware of

what the Church is about and what it's doing. Our stewardship, as we would call it back home, maybe means giving my time and talent as a catechist as well."

Given the parish's large size, Father Flock has at his disposal a lay staff that would be the envy of any parish here. "Some of these people have been working for the parish longer than I have, and most of them were volunteers before that," he said.

Their primary responsibility, though, is to provide the formation resources that empower parishioners to take ownership of their faith. "We use the central resources of the parish to provide formation," he said.

The first step is evangelization, Father Flock said, and a major component of the parish's plan has been door-to-door types of ministries. One that's been going strong for many years is called "A Pilgrimage with the Cross and Bible," in which the pastoral team is joined by volunteers in visiting the barrios. "We get to a few thousand homes each year," he said.

The Diocese of La Crosse's pastoral plan encourages similar collaboration on the parish and deanery levels – something Father Swing says he has seen beginning to flourish.

One example was the emergence of a Knights of Columbus council – the collaborative effort of men from both Sacred

Heart and St. Alexander's. "I think it took asking where there were already pockets of relationships within the community," Father Swing said. "That's something you can build on. We have about 80 guys now."

On the deanery level, St. Alexander's pastoral associate, FSPA Sister Catherine Kaiser, has been organizing meetings for parish directors of religious education. They have collaborated to host a deanery-wide youth rally, and to send youth on different trips.

"So we have a lot of inter-parochial sharing," Father Swing said. "A lot of good happens this way."