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November 30, 2016

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Over the past several years our diocese has been seeking to ensure that parishes are able to provide the necessary pastoral care for parishioners. I am grateful to the parish priests and parishioners for all the efforts, sacrifices, conversations and actions which have taken place.

As we all know, just a few years ago, parishes were served by a resident parish priest. Lately we have witnessed several parishes being served by one priest, as well as parishes combining to make new parishes and at times parishes being formed into new pastoral units. This has all been an attempt to meet the challenges of fewer and ageing priests, fewer parishioners and an increase in the age of our parishioners. (Nova Scotia now has a higher percentage of people over 65 than anywhere else in the country.)

I invite you to reflect on just one dimension of the current situation: Of the 40 diocesan priests currently with pastoral appointments:

3 priests are under the age of 50

6 priests are between the ages of 50 and 55.

4 priests are between the ages of 56 and 60

8 priests are between the ages of 61 and 65

8 priests are between the ages of 66 and 70

5 priests are between the ages of 71 and 75

6 priests are over the age of 75 (1 in his 70s, 4 in their mid-80s and 1 in his 90s)

Clearly we can all see that approximately one half of the priests currently serving our parishes are over the age of 65. Though the canonical age of retirement of priests is 75, we cannot be certain that all priests will continue in ministry to that age.

Coupled with this profile of our priests, we need to recognize that the pastoral work of parishes must be directed to the creating of disciples. As we continue to pray, worship, minister and operate in such a radically altered climate, we need to ask ourselves in what new ways must we engage our people in the life of the church.

The *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops* suggests a number of different ways of addressing the pastoral needs of an area in response to a shortage of priests. One of these ways is through the establishment of "Pastoral Teams composed of at least one priest and some members of the faithful – deacons, religious and laypersons – who are given the task of carrying out pastoral activities in several parishes." I believe this to be a reasonable approach for our diocese at this time.

In early October I invited the priests of the diocese to consider the possibility of creating pastoral zones throughout the diocese. I asked them to consider at their deanery and Parish Pastoral Council

meetings possible strategies for moving toward these pastoral zones. We will be meeting again in the New Year to discuss these matters further.

Pastoral Zones

Pastoral Zoning is an attempt to create the most effective ways of serving viable communities of faith. Pastoral Zoning is at the same time an attempt to recognize, encourage, and utilize more fully the possibilities for pastoral service to be exercised by Deacons and lay people.

What is a pastoral zone?

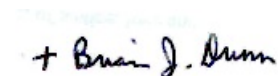
The exact composition and organization of a pastoral zone may vary from place to place. For example, a pastoral zone may be made up of (two or more) parishes which are located close to or even adjacent to one another. A Pastoral Zone could also be composed of a number of parishes which are in the same general geographic area, but may be twenty, thirty or more kilometers from each other. A Pastoral Zone could be composed of just two parishes or it could be made up of four or more parishes. Whatever the number of parishes in a Pastoral Zone, in the VAST MAJORITY of situations the pastoral zone will be served by one pastor or parish priest. That pastor would be part of a Team of people (a deacon and several lay people) who will be officially appointed by the bishop to provide pastoral care to the Zone. This pastoral team will minister in the entire Pastoral Zone in close collaboration with a Zone Pastoral Council, and various committees at the parish level. The Zone will provide services such as Faith Formation, Youth Ministry, Bereavement Ministry, etc. At this time (Fall 2016), it is expected that in the future there could be approximately 29 Pastoral Zones throughout our Diocese serving over 92 churches and chapels.

Thus, the purposes of Pastoral Zones include:

- ◆To reduce the unnecessary duplication of services by parishes wherever possible.
- ◆To encourage the fullest engagement and participation of deacons and lay people in the mission of the Church.
- ◆To maximize cooperation and communication at every level between existing parishes within the Pastoral Zones.
- ◆To promote a healthier and more manageable working situation for parish priests and all those who minister in parishes.

As we look to the formation of Pastoral Zones, we need to trust in the Lord's presence, believing that the Lord is "about to do a new thing" (Isaiah 43:19). We must look to the future with great trust, knowing Christ's promise: "And remember I am with you always until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). May the Lord bless us as we allow the Lord to "do a new thing" in our diocese and in our lives.

Sincerely in Christ,



† Brian Joseph Dunn
Bishop of Antigonish