

Church of Saint Thomas the Apostle, Church of Christ the King & Carondelet Catholic School

Cluster Relationship—Frequently Asked Questions (March 2024)

The two parishes of the Church of Saint Thomas the Apostle and the Church of Christ the King recently completed a survey of our communities to assess the understanding, views, and concerns regarding the parish cluster arrangement. Responsive to those survey results, the Coordinating Counsel and Fr. Erich Rutten prepared this FAQ.

What is a parish cluster?

A parish cluster is the term used to describe the situation when two or more parishes share the same pastor. In the model implemented in this cluster, there is one pastor who provides leadership, sacramental, and pastoral care for the two parishes and school. Each parish maintains separate leadership structures, including their Finance Councils, Pastoral Councils, and staffs. Each parish maintains financial independence from the other and bears responsibility for their own operating costs and budget. If the parishes determine it is advantageous, certain staff positions may be unified over time.

In contrast, when two or more parishes merge, they become legally and financially one corporate and ecclesial entity.

What is the purpose of a cluster relationship?

Entering into a cluster relationship is a way to manage the changes in the life of our church given fewer priests to serve a decreasing number of active parishioners. The consolidation of pastoral resources may include collaborating in various ministries and sharing some staff members, as appropriate, and may include opportunities for shared liturgical life.

Is it inevitable that our cluster will later be mandated to be a merger?

No, the Archdiocese has no plan to merge the two parishes.

Why do we need to change our Mass schedule?

The survey highlighted that many parishioners are concerned our pastor is spread too thin with the current Mass schedule. Respondents are also concerned that too many mass times or not having a consistent mass schedule with their pastor will impact the development of relationships between our pastor and parish members. The pastor needs to be with his people on a regular basis so that he can know them, and they can know

him. If the pastor is just one priest along with the substitute priests, then he remains not much more than a sub. Given the challenges of clustering, it is even more important that the pastor be present to each parish to develop a full relationship with both communities. Especially in this time of transition, our pastor needs to be able to truly lead.

It makes sense to consolidate our weekend Mass schedule seeking that this will lead to a fuller experience of liturgy and community.

What are the top opportunities with the cluster relationship?

The survey highlighted three areas of opportunity: (1) reinvigorate and strengthen youth programs by increasing the total number of youths involved in the life of Catholic church, (2) increase participation in small group ministries with a larger pool of people with similar interests, and (3) excitement to grow and expand existing ministries.

Are there other concerns regarding the cluster relationship?

The survey results identified three additional concerns: (1) the potential to lose individual parish identity, (2) the cluster results in a zero-sum activity with winners and losers based on every decision, or (3) simple territorialism that hinders collaboration and cooperation.

Change is often difficult and can be painful. It is natural to go through a process of grieving the loss of what is now past. That process often includes anger and sadness at the outset. But Jesus' promise to us is, if we can go through the dying, we will get to the rising. Change may be scary or difficult, but it can also be exciting as it leads to the birth of something new. Newly clustered parishes create the opportunity for new friendships, new ministries, an expanded community, and greater vibrancy at Mass. While some things are lost, other good things, and we are hopeful better things, are gained. The Lord has promised to be with us.

“Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

~ Matthew 28:20