

**Living Stones Planning Committee
(Article Series)**

**The Future of the Diocese of Ogdensburg:
How do we develop healthier and more vibrant parish communities that will retain
and attract new parishioners?**

**Article 1 of 6:
Historical Perspective**

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Looking at the future of the Diocese of Ogdensburg and how we develop healthier and more vibrant parish communities will be covered in a series of articles to be published in the North Country Catholic over the next several weeks. The topics to be discussed are exceedingly important, as they will relate to the health of our diocese and how we might become more vibrant and in an even stronger position to meet the pastoral needs of all parishioners. The specific topics to be discussed include the following:

1. Article One: A brief historical perspective of Living Stones Planning Committee & process.
2. Article Two: Summary of data from pastoral plans submitted by parish groupings to the Living Stones Planning Committee (LSPC).
3. Articles Three-Six: How to become a more vibrant parish, in a stronger position to meet the pastoral needs of all parishioners within our parish boundaries.

We hope you will read the articles, ponder, pray, and discuss them with your pastor and fellow parishioners. The future health of the diocese lies in our hands.

We have all been alarmed by the data published by the Pew Research Center. For example, "Among all U.S. adults who were raised Catholic, half (52%) have left the church at some point in their life."¹ We have to ask ourselves why have so many left the church? Again, to cite data from a Pew study, "among former Catholics who are now Protestant, 71 percent say they left Catholicism because their spiritual needs were not being met."²

Furthermore, according to data collected by the Diocese of Ogdensburg, in 1993 there were 161,722 registered Catholics, which dropped 35% to 104,113 in 2010. This drop occurred regardless of the fact the overall population in the Diocese of Ogdensburg actually increased by 14% from 430,000 in 1993 to 491,328 in 2010.

The alarming trend just cited is, in part, what led Bishop LaValley to bring together an Envisioning Team in January 2013 that met for a year. Their findings led to Bishop LaValley's proclamation at the Chrism Mass in 2014 and the establishment of three priorities designed to address needs identified during the envisioning process.

Priority One: Creating a Culture of Vocations
Priority Two: Strengthening Faith Formation in Family Life
Priority Three: Building Parishes with Living Stones

The third priority, Building Parishes with Living Stones, led to the establishment of the Living Stones Planning Committee charged with "Developing for parishes a plan, along with strategies for implementation, in order to:

- a. strengthen parish identity, including, but not limited to, realignment and restructuring
- b. activate greater participation among the laity in leadership roles
- c. assess parish demographics in relation to the economic and spiritual resources available.

The purpose of this plan is to enable parishes to become more vibrant, hope-filled, and joy-filled communities of disciples, to awaken in parishioners a new fervor for their Catholic faith, to restore hope to those away from the Church, and to reach out to those who wish to become members of the Catholic Church."

The Living Stones Planning Committee (LSPC) held its first meeting on November 12, 2014, and has been working with parishes to identify strengths and areas that need further development, in order to better meet the pastoral needs of their parishioners. This was accomplished with the use of a survey developed by the Living Stones Planning Committee (LSPC) that was sent to all pastors and which identified many of the elements that help determine the health and vibrancy of parishes. Twenty- nine of the thirty-six parish groupings in the diocese have completed and submitted their plans. Parishes will be asked, if they have not done so already, (1) to prioritize their identified needs and (2) to develop a plan for strengthening all areas of need identified over the next several years--with the overall goal of developing parishes that are more vibrant and that more effectively meet the pastoral needs of all parishioners within the boundaries of a parish grouping.

We are often impatient and want to address problems in a quick and relevant fashion. However, it is clear that significant change does not occur easily and quickly. It will take a number of years to fully benefit from what parishes have begun. What is important is to begin the planning process. The following Ernest Hemmingway quote emphasizes the importance of actions we begin today.

Today is only one day
in all the days that will ever be.
But what will happen in all the other days
that ever come
can depend on what you do today.

Ernest Hemmingway
For Whom the Bells Tolls

Powerful words that should give us pause and help to provide a context for what we are about. The Living Stones Planning Committee has begun a process and hopes to work with all parishes in beginning the process of becoming healthier and more vibrant than they are today.

During the first part of this process, parishes were asked to identify their strengths and areas of need--characteristics that add to the vibrancy of parishes. Now that most parishes have completed this first part of the process, it is important for the diocese to review the status of our parishes and the areas that require further development, in order to become healthier and more vibrant. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, these will be the topics covered over the next several issues of the North County Catholic. It is hoped that you will find the time to read, consider, and discuss the contents of these articles with your pastor and fellow parishioners.

Let's continue this discussion in the next few issues of the North County Catholic. The second article will summarize results from the pastoral plans submitted to the LSPC.

Hemmingway, Ernest (1940). For Whom the Bell Tolls. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons Publisher.

¹Pew Research Center (2015, September 2). Key findings about American Catholics. <http://pewrsr.ch/1KrnZCl>

²Pew Research Center (2009, April 27). Faith in Flux. Michael Lipka. <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/04/27/faith-in-flux/>