

"Crisis Kit" For Parishes Faced with Closing or Merging

Discerning An Appropriate Response

Immediate information viable parish communities need when faced with unwanted closure. It includes good and bad reasons to close parishes, how to seek immediate canonical redress, information about protecting parish rights, prayer and media resources, and where to get immediate help and support.

[Download a pdf of the Crisis kit here](#)

Excerpts:

Your Parish is Not A McDonald's Franchise. The parish family is where Catholics come to know their true identity as Christians. Parishes are not administrative units like McDonald's or your local bank, but true churches, and as such have basic rights. Because it is the Holy Spirit who leads the church, the voice of the Spirit of Jesus, alive within the local parish community, should be sought before any decision is made to disband it.

The most fundamental right of a parish in canon law is the right to come into existence, be acknowledged and continue in existence (c. 374.1). Once a community of faith is formed and recognized it becomes a "juridic person" which by nature is perpetual unless it is legitimately suppressed or stops all activity for 100 years (c120.1). To be suppressed, the impossibility of continued life must be clearly demonstrated.

Priest Shortage No Reason to Close Parishes. According to the well-known canon lawyer Fr. James Coriden, "A shortage of priests for pastoral leadership is not an adequate reason to suppress or combine parishes. Canon law strongly recommends liturgies of the word and group prayer in the absence of priests (c1248.2), clearly implying that the life and worship of the community must continue even when priestly leadership is absent." Canons 516.2 and 517.2 say the pastoral care of a parish may be entrusted to others such as lay ministers or deacons.

(See Parish Rights and Obligations

at <http://futurechurch.org/sopc/parishrightsandobligations.htm>)

Discerning An Appropriate Response. The importance of prayerfully evaluating the diocese's decision to close, cluster or merge a parish cannot be overstated. Hopefully, any such decision will have already invited the active involvement of parishioners and will not come as a surprise.

Should My Parish Close or Merge?

Some good reasons for closing parishes

1. Regularly decreasing numbers of parishioners with few newcomers despite focused attempts at evangelization and outreach. Too few parishioners in their active years to assume all the work necessary to keep parish functional.
2. Little to no catechesis, apostolic outreach or social justice mission
Intractable parish indebtedness over a lengthy period of time despite parishioner leadership in implementing plans to address the problem.
3. Preoccupation with financial survival impedes most ministerial outreach.
4. Parish is consuming future resources trying to maintain facilities that are too big or no longer useful for its life and work.
5. All of the above, with the availability of nearby solvent, vital parishes that share similar values and apostolic goals

Some poor reasons for closing parishes:

1. No priest able to live in the parish when competent lay ecclesial ministers, deacons and parish leadership are available.
2. Merging or closing based solely on size or geography without taking into consideration unique parish culture, vitality, solvency and apostolic and justice outreach.
3. Value of parish real estate.

Who May Vindicate Parish Rights? In canon law, the first person responsible for vindicating parish rights is the pastor of the parish. If the pastor cannot or will not assume this responsibility, then others entrusted with the care of the parish are

responsible, including pastoral administrators, members of the parish finance committee and parish pastoral council. If none of these can or will vindicate parish rights, then parishioners assume this responsibility.

Steps for Defending Parish Rights. In his book, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition: History, Theology and Canon Law*, Fr. James A. Coriden lists four lines of action that those responsible for defending parish rights can pursue.