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The Church in the Changing City: Parochial Restructuring in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in Historical Perspective

Thomas Rzeznik

On April 2, 1993, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia announced its decision to restructure parishes in North Philadelphia and the city of Chester. Responding to decades of demographic change and the mounting financial burden of maintaining aging church buildings, the archdiocese determined that the dense concentration of parishes in these two communities was no longer sustainable. Intended to encourage the “renewed evangelization of the Catholic people” in North Philadelphia and Chester, the restructuring plan called for the closure of sixteen parishes, the territorial expansion of five others, and the creation of two new parishes at the site of two of the closed parishes.¹

The decision stunned the local Catholic community. As memories of baptisms, weddings, and communal celebrations came flooding back, those who had devoted their time and hard-earned money to build and sustain these parishes felt an overwhelming sense of betrayal by church leaders. Urban activists charged that the church was abandoning the inner city, removing its presence from two of the region’s poorest communities. Battered by the effects of post-industrial economic decline, these once vibrant working class communities were crippled by job and population loss, increasing crime rates, and political marginalization. Amid these struggles, Catholics parishes anchored neighborhoods, providing institutional stability and offering essential social services to local communities.

The reaction was understandable. Even though a handful of parishes in Philadelphia had been closed during the 1970s and 1980s, the 1993 restructuring was the first time the archdiocese had closed parishes on such a large scale and in such a

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1. Lou Baldwin, “Cardinal Approves New Pastoral Plan for 21 Parishes,” *Catholic Standard & Times* (8 April 1993), 1; Christie L. Chicoine, “Church Presence is Key in New Pastoral Plan,” *Catholic Standard & Times* (15 April 1999); 10; and Cardinal Bevilacqua, “Parish and Schools Reorganization,” *Origins* (2 April 1993), 767-768.

concentrated geographic area.² The decision called attention to the state of urban ministry and forced Catholics to consider the future viability of their vast institutional network in a way that earlier actions had not. It also raised questions about how restructuring was implemented. Those affected by the parish closings argued that they had no discernable role in the decision-making process, and criticized the archdiocese for its heavy-handed approach to parochial restructuring. In the wake of public outcry, the archdiocese implemented a new system of “cluster pastoral planning,” which obliged all parishes to engage in ongoing strategic planning. The plan promised to decentralize the decision-making process by vesting more authority in local parish councils and regional parish clusters. From outward appearances, this change signaled a fundamental shift in archdiocesan policy, redistributing power in the planning process from the archdiocese to the parishes.

Moving beyond standard narratives of protest, this article situates parish closings in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia within a larger historical context. It offers a comparison not only with other Catholic dioceses but also with other religious communities in Philadelphia who faced their own earlier struggle with congregational decline and denominational planning. When viewed within this larger framework, patterns emerge that might otherwise go undetected. By examining the changing approach towards and rationale for church closings and parochial restructuring, this study reveals a recurring tension between centralized decision-making and the need for comprehensive planning on the one hand, and parochial autonomy and a respect for community self-determination on the other.

The tension is unavoidable, no matter the approach taken towards restructuring. In determining a course of action, church officials and local congregations have had to choose policies that fall somewhere between those two poles, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of that position. Parochial restructuring by sudden and swift diocesan fiat has proven an untenable strategy, even if it enables church officials to avoid prolonging a difficult and contentious process. This tactic creates needless rancor, alienates those affected by restructuring, and fosters distrust between church leaders and local communities. Greater consultation and parochial involvement in planning decisions offers a more amicable approach. Yet those who demand a greater role for the laity and local parish communities in the restructuring process often fail to recognize the distinct benefits that centralized decision making has historically offered the Catholic community, not only during periods of institutional growth, but also during the times of contraction. Centralized diocesan authority has allowed the Catholic Church to redirect energies and strategically

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2. According to the archdiocesan directory, fourteen churches closed between 1972 and 1989: Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament (1910-1972); St. Alphonsus (1852-1972); St. Catherine of Siena (1910-1972); St. Theresa of Avila (1853-1972); St. Ludwig (1891-1975); St. Mary of the Eternal (1911-1976); Our Lady of the Rosary (1928-1977); Sacred Heart (1913-1977); St. Gregory (1895-1981); St. Michael of the Saints (1924-1982); Our Lady of Mercy (1889-1984); St. Peter Claver (1886-1985); Corpus Christi (1912-1987); and St. Raphael (1904-1989).

invest resources as part of a comprehensive plan in a way other religious communities have not.

As a relatively recent phenomenon, Catholic parochial restructuring and church closings have not been the subject of sustained scholarly study. Most literature on the topic consists either of journalistic accounts that chronicle the fate of affected parishes, or policy analyses written for professional or denominational audiences that assess implementation procedures or church management practices. Social scientists have recently begun to take up the task of analyzing church closings and exploring how communities have been affected by transformations in the urban religious landscape, but the body of scholarship remains relatively thin.³ While these resources provide valuable insights into the reasons for and consequences of church closings and parochial restructuring, they generally fail to trace out larger historical patterns. For their part, historians of American Catholicism continue to advance our understanding of institutional development and the nature of parish life, but they have not yet turned their attention to these more recent developments. They lack the critical historical distance and access to archival materials that such study requires.

As a preliminary historical investigation of church closings in Philadelphia, this study faces those same limitations. I have not had access to restricted parochial records or internal archdiocesan communication regarding parochial restructuring in Philadelphia or any other diocese. In my analysis, I draw on journalistic accounts, diocesan reports, and other information that has entered the public record. I focus on how the reason for parish closings and parochial restructuring has been explained to and perceived by the public. Though constrained in some regards, this research moves the discussion in new historical directions. In making connections to other religious denominations that underwent their own restructuring earlier in the twentieth century, this study begins to broaden the scope of analysis and place events within a comparative perspective.

As a historical study, this article does not attempt to propose management models or recommend policy, as if there could ever be a “right” way to make such a difficult, contentious, and often necessary decision. Rather, it identifies one of the central tensions present within the various approaches towards church closings and parochial restructuring that have been employed in Philadelphia and elsewhere, both past and present, not only within the Catholic Church, but among other religious communities as well.

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3. This literature includes work on both Catholic and non-Catholic institutions. For representative works, see Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Jeffrey C. Bridger and David R. Maines, “Narrative Structures and the Catholic Church Closings in Detroit,” *Qualitative Sociology* (September 1998): 319-340; and Kevin Dougherty, Jared Maier, and Brian Vander Lugt, “When the Final Bell Tolls: Patterns of Church Closings in Two Protestant Denominations,” *Review of Religious Research* (September 2008): 49-73.

The Parishes of North Philadelphia and Chester after Restructuring

Dates in parentheses indicate year of parish founding

North Philadelphia

<i>St. Bonaventure</i> (1889):	Parish closed; building sold to New Life Evangelistic Church
<i>St. Columba</i> (1895):	Maintained as a parish, with expanded boundaries to serve parishioners of closed parishes; later renamed St. Martin de Porres
<i>St. Edward the Confessor</i> (1865):	Parish closed; building sold to Highway Temple of Deliverance
<i>St. Elizabeth</i> (1872):	Parish closed; building demolished in 1995
<i>The Gesu</i> (1868):	Parish closed; building serves as chapel of the Gesu School and St. Joseph Preparatory School
<i>St. Henry</i> (1916):	Parish closed; building maintained by the archdiocese as a social services center
<i>Holy Child</i> (1909):	Parish closed; site of new parish, Our Lady of Hope
<i>Incarnation of Our Lord</i> (1900):	Maintained as a parish, with expanded boundaries to serve parishioners of closed parishes
<i>St. Malachy</i> (1850):	Maintained as a parish, with expanded boundaries to serve parishioners of closed parishes
<i>Most Precious Blood</i> (1907):	Parish closed; building sold to Garden of Prayer Church
<i>Our Lady of the Holy Souls</i> (1909):	Parish closed; building serves as a worship site of Our Lady of Hope parish
<i>Our Lady of Pompeii</i> (1919):	Parish closed; building sold to Solomon Temple Baptist Church
<i>St. Stephen</i> (1843):	Parish closed; building sold to the Mount Zion Greater Highway Church of Christ
<i>St. Veronica</i> (1872):	Maintained as a parish, with expanded boundaries to serve parishioners of closed parishes
<i>Visitation BVM</i> (1873):	Maintained as a parish, with expanded boundaries to serve parishioners of closed parishes

Chester

<i>St. Anthony of Padua</i> (1908):	Parish closed; building sold to White Rock Baptist Church
<i>St. Hedwig</i> (1902):	Parish closed; building serves as a worship site of Sacred Heart Parish, Clifton Heights
<i>Immaculate Heart of Mary</i> (1873):	Parish closed; building serves as a worship site of St. Katharine Drexel parish
<i>St. Michael</i> (1842):	Parish closed; building sold to Conference of African Union First Colored Methodist Protestant Church
<i>Resurrection of Our Lord</i> (1911):	Parish closed; building sold to River of Life Assembly of God
<i>St. Robert</i> (1922):	Parish closed; site of new parish, St. Katharine Drexel

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Information compiled from: Lou Baldwin, "Cardinal Approves New Pastoral Plan for 21 Parishes," *Catholic Standard & Times* (8 April 1993), 1; "Archdiocesan Sites Have New Uses," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (25 May 1999), final ed., A-11; and *The Catholic Directory* (Philadelphia: Archdiocese of Philadelphia, 2007).

Detroit and Chicago

The church closings in North Philadelphia and the city of Chester may have been the first instance of large-scale parochial restructuring in the local archdiocese, but they were not without precedent. During the late 1980s, the archdioceses of Detroit and Chicago had both conducted parish feasibility studies and implemented restructuring plans, which provided a blueprint for church leaders in Philadelphia. Although not alone in closing parishes, implementing restructuring plans, and responding to demographic change, Chicago and Detroit attracted the most attention because of their size and prominence.

Saddled by the problems of deindustrialization and urban decline, conditions in Detroit had grown particularly acute. In September 1988, after conducting a five-year study, the specially-appointed City Church Task Force presented archdiocesan officials with a proposal to close forty-six parishes in the city of Detroit, where the Catholic population had fallen to less than 50,000. The following January, Cardinal Edmund Szoka announced that thirty-one parishes would close and twenty-five others would be designated “questionably viable.” The latter would be given a year to “demonstrate [their] ability to make genuine progress toward viability” according to a set of criteria, including membership growth and financial stability.⁴ Even though the affected parishes were each granted a hearing, such measures did little to lessen the sense of outrage among local Catholics, who had expected closings on a much smaller scale. Dissent was also apparent within the clerical ranks, as pastors criticized the archbishop for a lack of consultation.⁵ In a study by the National Pastoral Life Center, Msgr. Philip Murnion attributed the crisis in Detroit to the erosion of trust, as parishioners concluded that the decision to close churches had been predetermined and motivated by the bottom line.⁶

Such sentiments reveal how Catholics had difficulty coming to terms with the dire state of the church in the city and recognizing the need for drastic action. Indeed, the archdiocese argued that many parishes should have been closed twenty years earlier, but had not in order to avoid having it appear as though the archdiocese was closing churches in reaction to the 1967 riots. Largely lost on critics of the restructuring decision was the fact that the same archdiocesan resolve and hierarchical authority they faulted in 1988 had made that earlier commitment to urban ministry possible.⁷ While other churches fled the city in the wake of demographic change and the urban crisis,

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4. Cardinal Edmund Szoka, “Decision of Parish Closings Announced,” *Origins* (19 January 1989), 514-518. Of the twenty-five “questionably viable parishes,” twenty were allowed to remain open after one year, but under close scrutiny by the archdiocese.

5. Pat Windsor, “20 parishes on Detroit Hit List Spared,” *National Catholic Reporter* (19 January 1990), 3; “Susan Hogan-Albach, “Detroit Bishop Calls Church-Closing Plan ‘Disaster’,” *National Catholic Reporter* (9 December 1988), 4.

6. Philip J. Murnion and Anne Wenzel, *The Crisis of the Church in the Inner City* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 1990), 68.

7. “Arthur Jones, “Civic Bigwigs Join Church to Resurrect Detroit,” *National Catholic Reporter* (16 August 1991), 1, 5. For a more detailed study of archdiocesan efforts towards race relations in Detroit

Catholic parishes remained rooted in their communities. As historian Gerald Gamm has noted, “the remarkable aspect of the hierarchy is that it ensured that these churches would stay open, even as the Catholics were moving out . . . which helped keep these neighborhoods relatively stable”⁸

The year after the Detroit closures, events repeated themselves in Chicago when Cardinal Joseph Bernardin announced a series of parish closures and consolidations in the city and older suburbs. Faced with a looming financial crisis, the archdiocese could no longer afford to provide extensive operating subsidies, and so hastened a process of church closings that had been underway for the past decade.⁹ At least twenty-seven parishes had been closed or merged in Chicago since 1986, prior to the announcement of comprehensive archdiocesan restructuring. According to a 1989 article in the conservative *National Catholic Register*, Chicago succeeded in closing inner-city parishes with “little public anguish,” especially when compared with the recent furor in Detroit. It credited Bernardin for outlining evaluation criteria, consulting with parishioners, and bringing them to recognize their precarious position.¹⁰

With such procedures in place, it was generally perceived that Chicago approached and managed its restructuring plan in a more conducive manner. Shortly after his appointment to Chicago in 1982, Bernardin reorganized archdiocesan administrative offices to facilitate planning and improve coordination. He established the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council, a body with two-thirds of its membership drawn from the laity, to advise the bishop on pastoral decisions, and worked with clergy and archdiocesan staff to develop standards by which parishes would be evaluated. Bernardin also communicated the need for diocesan planning well in advance of any restructuring decision, providing parishes with criteria for self-study and publishing a series of columns on the topic in the diocesan paper in the summer of 1988.¹¹

In contrast to Detroit, the Archdiocese of Chicago mindfully presented the closures as part of a larger, archdiocesan-wide pastoral plan that signaled not the abandonment of mission, but rather “the reaffirmation of our commitment to quality pastoral care

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during the 1960s, see John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 209-215.

8. Quoted in Maurice Timothy Reidy, “Closing Catholic Parishes: A Painful Process That Could Be Done Better,” *Commonweal* (10 September 2004), 15. See also Gerald Gamm, *Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

9. In 1989, the Archdiocese of Chicago supported 108 urban parishes with \$18M in grants. See Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, “Chicago Parish and School Closings Announced,” *Origins* (1 February 1990), 566-571; Michael Hirsley, “Bernardin Announces 1st Round of Closings,” *Chicago Tribune* (22 January 1990), sec. A; and Hirsley, “40 Churches, Schools Face Reality That They Are Closing,” *Chicago Tribune* (1 July 1990), sec. A.

10. Bob Olmsted, “Chicago’s Approach Eases Church Closing Problems,” *National Catholic Register* (29 January 1989), 1.

11. Peter R. D’Agostino, “The Archdiocese of Chicago: Planning and Change for a Restructured Metropolis,” in *Religious Organizations and Structural Change in Metropolitan Chicago: The Research Report of the Religion in Urban America Program* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1996), 253-259.

for the entire faith community.”¹² Bernardin and other archdiocesan officials encouraged cooperation among parishes in a city where ethnic exclusivity had caused 27 percent of churches to be located less than one-half mile from a neighboring one.¹³ Although parishes and pastors reared on Chicago-style inter-parochial competition were unaccustomed to reaching across parish boundaries—with a number refusing to engage neighboring parishes in the planning process—procedures and policies put in place allowed parishes to feel included in deliberations, and therefore conferred a degree of legitimacy to the closures and consolidations.¹⁴

In assessing these church closures, scholars have pointed to a number of strategic shortcomings in the way the plans were implemented and received. According to one appraisal of the process by which the Detroit church closings were decided, the archdiocese focused too heavily on short-term fixes, and failed to develop a “true strategic planning process” despite their insistence that the restructuring was part of a long-term strategy. One sign of archdiocesan shortsightedness was the closure in 1990 of the Office for the Church in the City, the agency originally charged with reviewing the restructuring plan, thus limiting the archdiocese’s ability to conduct ongoing assessment.¹⁵ As sociologists Jeffrey Bridger and David Maines demonstrate, the archdiocese also changed its rationale for parochial restructuring mid-course. Describing the closures as a response to demographic change and “white flight” at first, and only later reframing the decision as part of a more comprehensive “renewal,” undermined diocesan authority and weakened the legitimacy of the process.¹⁶

In Chicago, similar tension arose between the two competing rationales for parochial restructuring, one broad and one narrow. In announcing the closures and consolidations, Bernardin spoke of the need to respond comprehensively to demographic, economic, and ecclesial change, but premised the decision largely on the need to “ensure greater financial stability of our local church.” According to archdiocesan figures, the number of parishes that had a current accounts surplus or were breaking even had fallen to 35 percent, down from 80 percent just six years earlier. The number running deficits or receiving archdiocesan aid had likewise risen from 20 to 65 percent. In 1989, the archdiocese provided \$18 million in financial support to 108 parishes, almost double the revenue collected in the annual diocesan assess-

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12. This passage came from the text of a letter Cardinal Bernardin had read at all masses on the weekend of January 20-21, 1990. It was reprinted in the sidebar that accompanied “Chicago Parish and School Closings/Consolidations Announced,” *Origins* (1 February 1990), 567. The criteria for parish planning and evaluation employed by the Archdiocese of Chicago can be found in the appendix to Murnion and Wenzel, *The Crisis of the Church in the Inner City*.

13. “Chicago Parish and School Closings/Consolidations Announced,” sidebar, 250.

14. D’Agostino, 251.

15. David Fukuzawa, “Developing a Strategy for the Urban Parish: The Lessons of the Church Closings in Detroit,” *New Theology Review* (February 1993), 63; and Szoka, “Decision on Parish Closings Announced,” 516. On the limits of planning capacity in Detroit, see also Murnion and Wenzel, *The Crisis of the Church in the Inner City*, 65-68.

16. Bridger and Maines, “Narrative Structures and the Catholic Church Closings in Detroit.”

ment.¹⁷ As Peter D'Agostino argues in his detailed analysis of institutional restructuring in the archdiocese, many Chicago Catholics interpreted "restructuring as a purely financial response to a financial problem," and viewed decisions with suspicion despite "Cardinal Bernardin's reputation for a consultative style of leadership."¹⁸

Philadelphia

Parochial restructuring in Philadelphia shared similarities with Chicago and Detroit, even though fewer parishes were affected. Like them, the restructuring plan was announced and implemented by centralized archdiocesan action and focused on the health of parish membership roles and ledger sheets. In the city of Chester, located to the south of Philadelphia, the Catholic population had declined from 18,786 in 1970 to 7,582 by 1991 according to archdiocesan figures, a drop of nearly 60 percent. In North Philadelphia, the Catholic population fell by an equally troubling 54 percent, from 54,326 to 24,825. Parishes in these two communities depended heavily on the archdiocese for operational subsidies and other financial support. The legacy of an earlier era when densely-populated Catholic working class neighborhoods and ethnic exclusivity necessitated a dense clustering of churches, the vast Catholic urban institutional network had become demographically and financially unsustainable. As early as 1984, archdiocesan officials had informed pastors of urban parishes that funds available to subsidize parishes were stretched thin.¹⁹

In implementing the restructuring plan, archdiocesan officials understood the benefit of swift, decisive action. This reflected and reinforced hierarchical authority, but also signaled the archdiocese's desire to avoid protracted protest. Even though canon law recognizes that the first and most fundamental right of a parish is to exist, archdiocesan officials knew that petitions for redress from closed parishes were rarely entertained by the Vatican and hardly ever succeeded.²⁰ Like their counterparts in Chicago, archdiocesan officials in Philadelphia argued that the decision would strengthen the church's presence in these inner-city areas by encouraging parishes to work together to meet the spiritual needs of their local communities.

In mimicking aspects of restructuring in Chicago and Detroit, Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua and church leaders in Philadelphia also replicated critical shortcomings. Among the lessons they overlooked was that a lack of discernable consultation fuels mistrust. Hearings held before and after the 1993 restructuring plan was announced were widely perceived as pointless. Even though the archdiocese argued that the deci-

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17. "Chicago Parish and School Closings/Consolidations Announced," 570 and sidebar, 567.

18. D'Agostino, 258.

19. Baldwin, "Cardinal Approves New Pastoral Plan for 21 Parishes"; and Murnion and Wenzel, *The Crisis of the Church in the Inner City*, 15-16.

20. James A. Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition: History, Theology, and Canon Law* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 72. For an analysis of appeal process in Chicago, see Thomas J. Paprocki, "Parish Closings and Administrative Recourse to the Apostolic See: Recent Experiences of the Archdiocese of Chicago," *The Jurist* 55 (1995): 875-896.

sion to close parishes in North Philadelphia was based on an eighteen-month study, critics charged that the archdiocese ignored committee recommendations, which proposed that six of seven churches remain open. One leaked report from the archdiocesan Office of Research and Planning seemed to indicate that archdiocesan officials had already determined which parishes would close ten months before the study period had ended, thereby raising doubts about the sincerity of the consultation process.²¹ From an archdiocesan perspective, however, such decisive action was a legitimate exercise of the archdiocesan prerogative and planning authority, especially given the reluctance of local parishes to consider more drastic action, as the initial committee recommendations apparently indicated.

Even though the archdiocese acted within its bounds, the plan seemed callous. By closing parishes in two of the region's poorest communities, the archdiocese opened itself to charges that the church was abandoning the inner-city. The situation in Chester was particularly telling. There, six parishes were consolidated into one, to be located at the site of St. Robert's, which archdiocesan officials argued offered the best physical plant. But St. Robert's was also located on the other side of the interstate highway and the rail lines, in a more stable neighborhood physically separated from the rest of the city. Although one of the other churches was retained as an evangelization center and another successfully fought to remain open as a worship site, the archdiocese effectively closed those parishes located literally 'on the wrong side of the tracks.' Such symbolic actions reinforced the perception that class and racial bias influenced the archdiocese's decision.²²

Even though the church closings were generally regarded as being handled poorly, the restructuring plan did not entirely forsake the inner-city as critics alleged. When that charge echoed through the archdiocese, Cardinal Bevilacqua replied, "I refuse to accept the accusation that we [are] hurting the poor. Our whole goal was to improve our assistance to the poor by concentrating the number of priests and funds, instead of spreading them around."²³ As part of the restructuring, the archdiocese promised that \$4 million would be reinvested in Chester and North Philadelphia, rededicating money that had been used for parish operating subsidies to alleviate parish deficits, finance capital repairs, and support new initiatives, such as the conversion of parish buildings for use as homeless shelters, AIDS hospices, or other social service ministries. In North Philadelphia, one parish became the site of a Catholic Evangelization Institute for outreach to the Hispanic community. Several parish buildings were acquired by Project HOME, a highly-regarded outreach program to the homeless founded in 1988 by Mercy Sr. Mary Scullion and Joan Dawson McConnon, to expand its residential programs. At the former Gesu parish, the Jesuits and the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, joined together to operate the school as a

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21. Baldwin, "Cardinal Approves New Pastoral Plan for 21 Parishes"; and Demetria Martinez, "Group Protests Parish Closings," *National Catholic Reporter* (3 September 1993), 3.

22. Lou Baldwin, "Forming a 'New' Church in Chester," *Catholic Standard & Times* (18 March 1993), 3.

23. Quoted in David O'Reilly, "Class Tensions Bubbling," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (25 May 1999), sec. A.

private Catholic institution now that it had lost parochial support.²⁴ Such initiatives reflect a shift away from the parish as the model of community engagement, and reveal the tangible benefits of institutional coordination. As one community organizer remarked five years after the church closings, “the immediate neighborhood around St. Elizabeth’s,” one of the closed parishes in North Philadelphia where the buildings were converted to house social service ministries, “is a lot better off now than when the parish was there.”²⁵

While developments in North Philadelphia and Chester called attention to the need for more comprehensive planning throughout the archdiocese, the controversy surrounding restructuring in those two communities revealed the need to reassess strategy. In the wake of the 1993 restructuring plan, the archdiocese implemented a system of “cluster pastoral planning,” which signaled a fundamental shift in archdiocesan policy. Future restructuring would now rest not just with archdiocesan officials, but with parish communities themselves. Under cluster planning, parishes grouped according to geography and “perceived affinity” were encouraged to “work together by sharing information and coordinating activities, by sharing ministry through programs, by sharing personnel, and by planning together for a more authentic, faithful, and vital expression of lived church life than any one...could provide on its own.”²⁶ This was asking much from parishes—and their pastors—who were accustomed to relative autonomy and insularity.

Cluster planning guidelines also redefined parish viability. Spiritual measures, such as average Mass attendance and the number of weddings and baptisms, were to be considered more substantially alongside financial figures in diagnosing parochial health. A similar assessment approach was recently employed in the Archdiocese of Boston when it closed more than fifty parishes in 2004. One of the factors that determined a parish’s fate there was its ranking on the “sacramental index,” the sum of baptisms, funerals, and marriages within a twelve-month period.²⁷ In Philadelphia, the assessment of the spiritual health of a parish also considers the ratio of baptisms

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24. “Hope in the Future of North Philadelphia Catholics,” *Catholic Standard & Times* (8 April 1993), 11; Christine L. Chicoine, “Church Presence is Key in New Pastoral Plan,” *Catholic Standard & Times* (15 April 1993), 10; Lou Baldwin, “St. Martin de Porres School: Renovated Building Renews commitment to North Philadelphia,” *Catholic Standard & Times* (9 December 1993), 3; and “Archdiocesan Sites Have New Uses,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (25 May 1999), sec. A.

25. O’Reilly, “Class Tensions Bubbling.”

26. On the cluster planning process, see *Guided by Faith: Guide Book for the People of God in Cluster Pastoral Planning*, revised ed. (Philadelphia: Office of Research and Planning, August 1996), 11. Information on ongoing planning in the archdiocese can also be found on the Office of Research and Planning’s website, <http://www.archphila.org/pastplan/index.htm>. When the clusters were first assigned, they varied greatly in size and composition. The smallest had only three parishes, while others had as many as twelve. One cluster in Northeast Philadelphia represented over 105,000 registered Catholics, which was more than many U.S. dioceses. Although the clusters were based on geographic proximity, it is also important to note that groupings did not cross the city-suburban line.

27. Information on restructuring in Boston is available on the archdiocese’s website, http://www.rcab.org/Parish_Reconfiguration/HomePage.html. Reporting from the *Boston Globe*, <http://www.boston.com/news/specials/parishes>, included maps of parishes ranked by sacramental activity.

to funerals as a way of determining whether a parish is growing or shrinking. By broadening the definition of parish viability in these ways, the archdioceses of Philadelphia and Boston have made it clear that parish restructuring is not simply a concern for inner-city parishes, nor are decisions to be made for narrow budgetary reasons. Sacramental calculations can force small but financially-solvent parishes to consider their long-term prospects.

Emphasizing demographic and sacramental realities in such a way diverts attention away from the debate over centralized decision-making and local autonomy. Decisions appear self-evident since the fate of a parish seemingly depends on its compliance with certain objective criteria. Justifying parochial restructuring in such a manner also depoliticizes the planning process, shielding decision-makers from charges of racism, class bias, or abandonment of inner-city mission. In reality, however, how one interprets and responds to sacramental and demographic data still reflects the interests and priorities of particular parties, whether at the diocesan or the parochial level. Data are not value-neutral, nor is demography destiny.

In implementing such changes, cluster planning promised to make the restructuring process more transparent and, to some extent, more democratic, now that parish communities had a voice in determining their own fate. As part of the planning process, each parish was to establish a parish pastoral council, which would aid the pastor in parochial self-study and help assess the strengths and weaknesses of the parish along four main criteria: personnel, religious activity, finances and physical plant. After the process of parochial self-study was completed, representatives from each parish in a cluster were to meet to discuss the best allocation of resources and the sharing of ministry.

In sharing responsibility in such a manner, cluster pastoral planning conforms to the principle of subsidiarity found within Catholic social teaching. Subsidiarity holds that decisions should be made and policies implemented at the lowest possible level of effectiveness. Decisions that properly belong to local or subordinate organizations should not be subsumed by larger, centralized administrative entities. The diocese, therefore, should be responsible for only those policies that individual parishes or local clusters cannot manage or implement on their own.²⁸

The degree of parochial self-governance, however, was somewhat misleading. Parishes and clusters did not control their destinies to the extent that many believed. Some pastors refused to consult with their parish councils during the planning process, while others failed to keep parishioners informed of cluster deliberations. The presence of archdiocesan facilitators at cluster meetings ensured that proposals conformed to planning guidelines and took archdiocesan interests into account. Parish participation in the planning process, although more extensive than it had been previously, remained subject to hierarchical oversight.²⁹

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28. On subsidiarity, see Thomas Massaro, SJ, *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 89-91; and *Guided by Faith*, 35.

29. *Guided By Faith*, 16-17.

The archdiocese also retained control over the allocation of one key resource—clergy. By determining clerical appointments, the archdiocese could pressure parishes to contemplate consolidation or closure if fewer priests were assigned to a particular cluster based on a given parishioner-to-priest ratio, initially 3,000:1. Given such conditions, a number of parishes in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia have closed since 1993, leading some to criticize cluster planning as “a thinly disguised plan of the archdiocese to place the burden of inevitable parish closings squarely on the shoulders of their own parishioners.”³⁰ Those who study church management practices have also expressed concern about such allotment ratios. Over-reliance on such criteria, they caution, can encourage decisions to be made on the grounds of administrative expediency, and turns spiritual health into a numbers game.³¹

Such decisions further reflect the tension between centralized authority and localized decision-making. Unlike Protestant congregations, whose members “call” ministers to serve, Catholics parishes do not hire their own clergy. Rather, priests are assigned to parishes by the bishop or head of a religious order. While some may wish that Catholic parishes had a role in the selection of their pastors—a topic of considerable discussion in the wake the sexual abuse crisis—centralized control over clerical assignments can ensure that parishes in poorer communities or less desirable locales do not have to compete with parishes elsewhere to receive spiritual care.³² Catholic hierarchical authority may allow for a more strategic deployment of limited human resources, but it again leads those who expect greater parochial self-governance to criticize the lack of consultation. As the clerical shortage grows more acute, staffing decisions promise to become the next fault line between diocesan leaders and local parish communities, especially once further parish consolidation become an untenable means of balancing the parishioner-to-priest ratio.

Cluster planning may not have democratized the restructuring process, but it did decentralize procedures. The change is not insignificant. By allowing restructuring decisions to be made by clusters, the process has become more piecemeal. Between 2000 and 2006, the archdiocese closed no fewer than eighteen parishes within the city of Philadelphia, a number greater than those affected by the 1993 restructuring plan. Since the decisions were announced incrementally as part of the acceptance of cluster plans, these more recent closures did not prompt a sustained discussion about the

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30. Cited in “Talk of More Church Closings Provokes Ire in Philadelphia,” *National Catholic Reporter* (3 July 1998), 2. Of the parishes in Philadelphia that have closed since 1993, a large number were older “ethnic” parishes serving the Italian and Polish communities: St. Anthony of Padua (1999); St. Carthage (2000); St. Hedwig (2000); St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi (2000); Our Lady of Czestochowa (2000); Our Lady of Loretto (2000); Transfiguration of Our Lord (2000). St. Ladislaus (2003); St. Aloysius (2003); St. Clement (2004); Good Shepherd (2004); St. Irenaeus (2004); King of Peace (2004); Our Lady of the Rosary (2005); Our Lady of Victory (2005); St. Boniface (2006); St. Stanislaus (2006); Our Lady of Angels (2006).

31. George Wilson, S.J., “Why Close St. Ben’s?” *America* (7 May 2001).

32. For a discussion of this problem within Protestant denominations, see Charles and Diane Crane, *The Clergy Search Dilemma: Pastors and Lay People Reflect on the Crisis of Clergy Deployment* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1991).

future of urban ministry or spark critical reflection among Catholics throughout the archdiocese as earlier ones had. Whether a sign of more congenial planning and greater acceptance of the need to close parishes, or simply resignation to the inevitable, the closure of a parish no longer commands front-page headlines.

While decentralization of decision-making authority has made the planning process more amicable, it has also allowed parishes to avoid making difficult decisions. Cluster committees tend to resist closing or consolidating parishes, unless reduced clerical allotments, the loss of operational subsidies, or other outside pressures force them to contemplate such action. They often adopt stop-gap measures, like twinning or the reclassification of churches as worship sites, to ensure short-term survival. Such actions also shield restructuring decisions from the type of public scrutiny that emerged in the wake of the 1993 church closings.³³

Protestant Precursors

In a way, the decentralized nature of cluster pastoral planning is reminiscent of the congregational model of church governance that has guided Episcopalians, Presbyterians and members of other Protestant denominations when they have confronted demographic change and membership decline, as they did in Philadelphia during the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. Protestant churches are generally organized as independent, lay-governed congregations, whose members decide whether their church should close, consolidate, or relocate. Denominational authorities can, at most, recommend a course of action. Only by requiring approval for the establishment of new churches in order to prevent undue competition among member congregations do denominational bodies have some limited degree of planning authority.³⁴

This system of governance enabled congregations to control their own destiny, but it also precluded the possibility for comprehensive planning. Bound to follow the will of their members, Protestant congregations had little incentive to think beyond their own interests. Writing in 1928, the editors of the Episcopal diocesan newspaper argued, "If tomorrow it were announced that Holy Trinity [on Rittenhouse Square] was going to sell out and move to Bryn Mawr . . . there would be a general feeling that the moves were wise and that the 'Church was following the people.' What such moves would really mean is that the Church was deserting the people." Issuing a clarification call, they concluded, "Someone needs to cry out, 'Wake up, Philadelphia Episcopalians!'"³⁵ Members of the clergy similarly voiced frustration that the

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33. In a survey of the cluster plans prepared by January 2000, available through the Archdiocesan Office for Research and Planning, fourteen sets of twinned parishes were proposed. In one cluster, eight out of ten parishes were recommended for twinning. See <http://www.archphila.org/cluster/c21/cs21nov1997.htm>.

34. On the procedures for establishing a new parish within the Episcopal Church, see Canons 11 and 12, *Constitutions and Canons for the Government of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Diocese of Pennsylvania, 1923).

35. "Changing Philadelphia," *Church News* (December 1928), 90.

Episcopal diocese had no legal power or canonical authority to force individual parishes to remain in a city if parishioners and the vestry chose to relocate.³⁶ Between 1900 and 1930, the number of Episcopal churches in the downtown district fell from thirteen to nine, the result of voluntary dissolution, merger, or relocation.³⁷ It was not until 1935, when a change in state law recognized that property given to a local church was to be held in trust by its members for the good of the larger religious organization of which it is part, that the diocese was able to change its canons to require parishes to seek approval of the bishop and standing committee before the “removal” of a parish or “alienation” of parish property.³⁸ Ultimately, however, the change did little to alter the pattern of church migration and merger. Between 1900 and 1965, some sixty churches closed within the Episcopal diocese, the majority of which were located in older urban areas.³⁹

The Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia faced similar difficulties. Beginning in the 1920s, local Presbyterian leaders expressed concern about the shift of church membership from downtown areas to the suburban periphery. Statistics indicating membership growth in northern and western areas of the city were deceptive, since those gains generally came at the expense of downtown congregations. In 1930, a denominational report called for greater cooperation between the two local presbyteries and their member congregations. The author, William P. Shriver, the Director of City Work for the Presbyterian Church’s Board of National Missions, urged local Presbyterians to implement a regional plan and support efforts that would ensure a continued Presbyterian presence in the city.⁴⁰ In the Spring Garden and Fairmount sections of the city, just to the northeast of Center City, Shriver’s “case for adjustment” recommended that ten Presbyterian churches be reduced to four in response to a 17 percent decline in membership and an even more troubling 30 percent drop in Sunday School enrollment that had occurred the preceding ten years, mostly as a result of the area’s changing racial demographics.⁴¹

A decade later, the health of many urban congregations had only worsened, and few of the policy recommendations contained in Shriver’s report had been imple-

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36. Rev. David M. Steele, “The Problem of the Central City Church,” *Church News* (March 1933), 213.

37. For the purposes of this paper, I have defined the “downtown” as the area between the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers and Vine and South Streets. The count, which is based on parochial listings in *Lloyd’s Clerical Directory* (Chicago: American Church Publishing Company, 1911 and 1931), does not include mission chapels located within the area.

38. Rev. Francis C. Hartshorne, “Safeguarding the Church’s Future: Some Steps Taken by the Last Diocesan Convention to Preserve Parish and Mission Properties for Coming Generations,” *Church News* (December 1940), 22.

39. J. Wesley Twelves, *A History of the Diocese of Pennsylvania of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA, 1784-1968* (Philadelphia: Diocese of Pennsylvania, 1969), 96.

40. William P. Shriver, *The Presbyterian Church in Metropolitan Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: January 1930), Presbyterian Historical Society. For a broader overview of the growth of the Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, see Kenneth A. Hammonds, *Historical Directory of Presbyterian Churches and Presbyteries of Greater Philadelphia: Related to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Its Antecedents, 1690-1990* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1993).

41. Shriver, 40-41.

mented. Those congregations that had closed during the 1930s were generally the financial victims of the Great Depression and not part of any comprehensive plan. In 1942, church officials released a second report conducted by the Board of National Missions under the direction of H. Paul Douglass, a pioneer in religious sociology and congregational study. Calling attention to the “vast losses involved in a transition from one era of urban development to another,” Douglass again urged Presbyterians to think denominationally and better coordinate their response to neighborhood transition. He believed that church members had a duty to assist Presbyterians outside of their own congregations, and called on regional presbyteries and the state synod to develop a system of support for poor and struggling churches. Such efforts, he insisted, would help the local Presbyterian Church plan for the future by establishing mechanisms to respond to future demographic change. He reminded stable congregations that such planning is in their best interests, too, since the tide of change might eventually place them in need.⁴²

Despite the urgency of these two reports, denominational officials lacked enforcement mechanisms or planning authority that would enable them to implement policy recommendations.⁴³ These limitations revealed themselves in the 1940s and 1950s, when denominational officials attempted to respond to racial change and the spiritual needs of the city’s growing African-American population. In 1942, Douglass had recommended that departing white congregations turn over their buildings to black congregations as a means of preserving denominational presence in the city. He remained optimistic that white congregations would be willing to make a financial sacrifice and offer their properties to the new congregations on generous terms.

Denominational officials, however, could not compel member congregations to act in such a manner. If departing congregations needed resources to finance new church construction in the suburbs or were expected to bring maximum resources to a merger agreement, their desire to secure full market value of their property could easily supersede their sense of goodwill and compassion towards their co-religionists. A local report that responded to national efforts to study the plight of inner-city churches during the 1950s repeated the plea, but again lacked a mandate. Unable to dictate a course of action, church officials could only suggest that churches consider ways to preserve Presbyterian presence in urban neighborhoods and ask relocating congregations to make an effort to sell church properties to “approved denominational groups.”⁴⁴

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42. H. Paul Douglass, *The Presbyterian Church in Metropolitan Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: May 1942), quote on 57. For more on Douglass, see Jeffrey K. Hadden, “H. Paul Douglass: His Perspective and His Work,” *Review of Religious Research* (September 1980): 66-89.

43. Officially, the presbytery can withhold consent for congregational merger, as it did in 1932 when a congregation refused a request to set aside part of the proceeds from the sale of their church to support continuing Presbyterian ministry in the area, but only rarely has such authority been exercised. On this particular case, see Hammonds, 88.

44. “Report of Special Committee of Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the USA on Study of the Inner City” and Presbytery of Philadelphia, “Principles of Presbytery Strategy” (8 March 1955), Box 138, Folder 1957, Pew Family Papers, Acc. 1862, Hagley Museum and Library.

Curiously, such tensions within the Protestant community were the inverse of later Catholic experiences. Whereas Catholics affected by parochial restructuring laid blame on diocesan officials, it was denominational leaders among Protestants who voiced frustration with the nature of the decision-making process. They recognized that congregational autonomy hindered their ability to implement a coordinated response to changing realities. It promoted incremental action that privileged congregational interests, sometimes at the expense of denominational planning. Back in 1942, H. Paul Douglass cautioned Presbyterians to avoid “heroic delaying action” and other stopgap measures that shore up dying congregations or seek to preserve an untenable status quo. Such efforts, he argued, command resources that might be better directed towards other initiatives.⁴⁵ For Catholics, cluster planning risked replicating some of these weaknesses. The type of strategic reinvestment seen in North Philadelphia and Chester, with money and energy redistributed from parochial self-preservation to social outreach and renewed evangelization, would have been much more difficult to implement had policies been formulated on a parish-by-parish basis.

In reality, however, cluster pastoral planning never permitted the same degree of localized decision-making and parochial autonomy as Protestant churches enjoyed under their system of congregational governance. As the late Peter D’Agostino noted in his study of diocesan planning in Chicago, “the whole complex structure of the Church—its policies for planning, allocating resources, liturgies, social services, political structure—does not reveal a ‘congregational’ Church in theory or practice.”⁴⁶

Camden

Given demographic trends and financial constraints, continued church closings in Philadelphia and other dioceses seem all but inevitable. While it is impossible to predict how those decisions will be handled, it is safe to say that the process will not be uncontroversial. Recent parochial restructuring in the Diocese of Camden, New Jersey illustrates how the tension between local consultation and centralized decision-making persists even as dioceses refine their approach to institutional planning. In April 2008, Bishop Joseph Galante announced a comprehensive reorganization of the diocese that would reduce the number of parishes from 124 to 66 within the course of two years in response to population shifts, declining Mass attendance, financial constraints, and the growing clerical shortage.⁴⁷

While the extent of the restructuring plan surprised many, both in the diocese and elsewhere, the process had not been secretive. In January 2007, Bishop Galante publicly announced that the diocese was launching a “major, comprehensive planning

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45. Douglass, 57.

46. D’Agostino, 279.

47. Bishop Galante, “Reconfiguration of Parishes in the Diocese of Camden,” *Origins* (17 April 2008): 704-709. The numerical decline in parishes is somewhat misleading. While the number of canonically-recognized parishes will be reduced to 66, a number of closed churches will continue to serve as worship sites.

initiative that will shape the Church of South Jersey for years to come.”⁴⁸ This had followed a period of pre-planning, during which time parishes were asked to reflect on demographic trends and evaluate pastoral priorities. As with post-1993 planning in Philadelphia, every parish in the Diocese of Camden was required to participate in the planning process as part of a local cluster, whose members then reported to the a local dean who was responsible for coordinating regional efforts and ensuring open lines of communication. Throughout 2007, representatives of the various clusters and deaneries developed planning recommendations, then reviewed and refined them before a final set was presented to the bishop and the diocesan planning commission in early 2008.⁴⁹

Camden officials communicated the process better than their Philadelphia counterparts had in 1993, when many felt blindsided by the announcement of church closings. As with recent restructuring in Philadelphia, Boston, and other dioceses, Camden officials grounded their decision in statistical data, noting trends in the redistribution of the Catholic population from older cities and shore communities to suburban districts and inland areas. In 2006, the diocese had issued an extensive demographic study that documented those population shifts, as well as other trends, including the growth of the Hispanic population, and declines in sacramental practice, school enrollment, and priestly personnel.⁵⁰ After the bishop announced the final plan, the diocese even created a website to explain how the planning process had been conducted, why it was necessary, and how it would be implemented.

Even with these efforts, many people, including individuals involved in planning discussions, misunderstood the nature of the consultation process. According to the director of the Office of Pastoral Planning for the diocese, “a few deanery planners came to believe over time that what they voted on and recommended was a definitive plan for their deanery,” or that their recommendations would be “automatically endorsed” by the diocese. In reality, however, final authority rested with the bishop, and in several instances, he modified the recommendations he received. In such instances, the diocesan officials argued that changes were made to promote “common good of the entire Church of South Jersey” and not just “individual deaneries or parishes.”⁵¹

As events in Camden reveal, spheres of authority remain contested. Parishioners have come to expect a wider degree of discretion in planning decisions and contend that their desire to maintain their parish should be respected. Diocesan authorities, however, legitimately argue that they have a responsibility to ensure the vitality of the

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48. Diocese of Camden, Office of Communications, “Bishop of Camden Media Briefing,” (18 January 2007).

49. An overview of the planning process timetable is available at diocesan restructuring plan website: <http://www.gatheringgodsgifts.org>.

50. Diocese of Camden, “Demographic Factors Impacting the Diocese of Camden—2006,” available at <http://www.gatheringgodsgifts.org>.

51. Sister Marilyn Vollmer, SSM, “Multiple Consultations Preceded Bishop Galante’s Announcements,” *Star Herald* (2 May 2008).

entire local church, which requires that greater planning authority and control over resource allocation be vested in hands of the bishop and other diocesan officials.

Conclusion

For much of its history, the Catholic Church in the United States has been defined by the institutions it built. More recently, however, the story of institutional expansion has been reversed. According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, the number of parishes in the United States declined from 19,331 in 1995 to 18,479 at the start of 2009.⁵² Few expect the trend to diminish, making the process by which restructuring decisions are made all the more crucial. Although historical analysis does not enable us to discern the ideal method of parochial restructuring, the study of past decisions can reveal dynamics that likely will shape future deliberations, including the persistent tension between diocesan authority and parochial autonomy.

The learning curve has indeed been steep. In Philadelphia, the public outcry and controversy that surrounded the archdiocese's decision to close churches in North Philadelphia and Chester prompted the archdiocese to reassess its restructuring policies. The implementation of cluster planning added a degree of transparency to the restructuring process, engaged parishes more thoroughly in future decisions, and provided a means of ongoing assessment. Such changes, however, have arguably come at the expense of comprehensive planning and renewal, if that is indeed the goal. Contentious though it may have been, the 1993 restructuring plan forced Catholics to shed the cocoon of parochial exclusivity and reassess the place of the church in the changing city.

How parochial restructuring and the tensions between diocesan authority and parochial autonomy will be negotiated in the future cannot be easily predicted. Approaches taken will depend on many factors, including local culture and episcopal leadership style, as they have in the past. Detroit, for instance, never had the degree of lay involvement of which Chicago Catholics are so proud; yet Chicago may not have experienced the same type of cooperative reorganization under Cardinal John Cody, Cardinal Bernardin's predecessor, regardless of local culture. In Philadelphia, as in other large dioceses, lay and clerical expectations jointly contribute to a reluctance to consider lay administrators and other alternative parish staffing models. Amid these regional variegations, cluster planning and other collaborative models will likely make restructuring decisions less acrimonious, but they will not resolve the tension between diocesan authority and parochial autonomy. They simply shift the locus of debate.

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52. Tom Roberts, "Parish Closing Trauma," *National Catholic Reporter* (23 January 2009), 13.