

Three Trains

Trains travelled our parish territories over the years. Most of the areas once travelled by trains are now bicycle and walking trails. Actually, you can reach five of the six parishes by taking these trails. Trains still run past Saint Michael and the Avella area.

Recently, I have felt that I have been riding three different trains. **One train** represents the six parish staffs that work so hard for the six individual churches. To serve the new parish, one staff will need to be formed. There is much prayer and discernment on making this decision. This past week, I had the opportunity to meet with the staff members of our parishes, as well as our pastoral councils and our finance councils. With six parishes and numerous offices and buildings, there is overlap and duplication of staff roles in our grouping.

In order to reach July 2020 as a single parish, changes in the number of staff members will be necessary. Our goal is to honor the contributions that our staff members have made over the years, while continuing to be good stewards of the resources that our faith community is providing to our parishes. A process has begun to take next steps towards realigning our staff, while ensuring that our faith community returns to financial solvency.

The **second train** represents the Mass schedule. Eleven (11) Masses are offered at six Church buildings. One day there will be one or two priests to serve this parish. I shared on the website the October count Mass attendance. It also shows the seating capacity and the percentage of capacity. The diocese requires over 50% capacity for each Mass. Many of our Sunday Mass count numbers are well below the 50%. There is a need to revisit our current Mass schedule. A REALISTIC Mass schedule is needed as we move forward to become a new parish.

The **third train** is our finances. As you are aware, the Financial Statements for each of our six parishes were recently completed and made available in all parish bulletins. These reports remain posted on our parish website. They show a sobering reality in our parishes. Over the past decades, parish registrations, Mass attendance, and contributions have been decreasing. The effect of last summer's grand jury report is being felt at each of our parishes – donations toward the operation of all our parishes have decreased significantly over the past year. As a result, expenses at our parishes are greater than our revenues.

Managing the resources of a parish is not very different from managing a household budget: often, it comes down to the question "how can we provide what our family needs, given the limited resources that we have?" In those times when our families have more resources at our disposal, it's easier to provide those things that our families need and want. But, in those times when resources are scarce, families are often forced to make difficult choices in order to prioritize their spending, in order to ensure that they don't spend more than they're able to afford. For every dollar that we receive in the collection basket, we're spending in excess of that same dollar on parish expenses and employee compensation. In order to keep our faith community solvent, we must begin to "live within our means." We are developing a plan to bring us back to "living within our means."

All three of these trains are coming into the station at the same time. We will have to make difficult decisions as we move forward to a new parish, always trusting in the Lord, and always seeking his guidance and strength. With good stewardship of our resources, and careful planning, we can become a stable, self-sustaining Catholic community that will continue to serve the people of Avella, Bulger, Burgettstown, Imperial, McDonald, and Oakdale for years to come.

In Christ,
Fr. Harry Bielewicz