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May 2, 2026

## **The Mission Alignment Process: Challenges and Opportunities**

A statement from Bishop Michael C. Barber, SJ

The Mission Alignment Process (MAP), initiated five years ago, was designed to foster vibrant parishes by strategically aligning the valuable resources of the diocese. The goal is clear: to "Know Christ better and to make Him better known," ensuring that every decision serves the mission of the Church.

On April 29, I announced a significant new phase in MAP, which involves closing 13 worship sites: 12 parishes and one pastoral center. This decision brings understandable pain to those affected. I grieve with all who are coping with this change, knowing that grief is a suffering born from great love. One of the churches to be closed is where my paternal grandparents were married.

These painful decisions have been made only after extensive consultation and research, in recognition that the future of our church must be distinct from its past.

This is because the future demographics are vastly different from 50 years ago. Between the mid-1930s and early 1960s, the United States experienced a dramatic increase in births that is unparalleled.

For a variety of reasons, Baby Boomers left organized religion in droves. But their sheer numbers meant a sizable number stayed. The generations following the Baby Boomers, Gen X and Millennial, also disengaged from a faith, but their percentage of the overall population is out shadowed by the Baby Boomers, even now. While we are seeing a resurgence in engagement in religion by Gen Z, their numbers are not expected to be anywhere near the Baby Boomers.

We are seeing the impact of this reality in our diocese.

**FOR THE GREATER GLORY OF GOD**

It may be tempting to attribute the Mission Alignment Process solely to financial concerns, but the funding is but a symptom of other realities.

Declining attendance and participation are evident in Mass attendance, ministry program enrollment, sacramental participation, enrollment in Catholic schools, and vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

As the number of priests decline, and the age of our priests rises, we must acknowledge it is not feasible to expect pastors to take on additional church sites.

Younger generations are delaying marriage and other vocational choices and having fewer children.

Trying to maintain the status quo with "artificial income" from renting closed Catholic school properties does not address the root causes.

More important than financial restructuring is the need to deepen relationships with Jesus Christ and rejuvenate our parishes. By focusing our resources where they are most needed, we address both financial and missionary objectives.

Some parishes have responded proactively by utilizing the resources of organizations such as Amazing Parish and Catholic Alpha. These parishes are making concerted efforts to form missionary disciples and transition from a "maintenance to mission" model, resulting in growing congregations.

All but one parish site and one pastoral center scheduled for closure already share priests and other staff and resources with neighboring parishes. This arrangement will continue in most cases. We anticipate no one will be burdened with driving more than 10 minutes to their new parish. Diocesan leadership will work closely with pastors of closing churches to determine which neighboring parishes will best welcome their remaining congregations.

I am looking to my pastors and to the faithful of the diocese to help us through this challenging chapter in our history. With goodwill and consultation, we can find the best way forward so that no one is lost, and all are welcomed at their new place of worship.

Jesus promised never to abandon His flock. With His guidance and the intercession of our Blessed Mother, let us work together in facing the current challenges. My prayers are with you all.