Executive Summary:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the APPC process to “Strengthen our Parishes as Primary Communities of Faith”.

Based on St Catherine of Alexandria in Westford “town hall” meetings and other parishioner feedback, the Parish Pastoral Council offers the following top-level feedback:

- From 2006 – 2012, we have become an active and vibrant parish focused on evangelization, community outreach, and our youth and young adults.
- Our growth in parish vitality and focus on mission over maintenance is driven by the example and caring leadership of our pastor, Father Peter Quinn. Today’s pastoral leadership situation represents a major step forward from the 80’s and 90’s in terms of involvement, connectivity, and spiritual nourishment.
- While the majority of parishioners appreciate the need for a new pastoral service approach, trust in the Archdiocese administration remains an issue;
- While options exist, the proposed St Anne and St Catherine linkage is viewed as a good fit with the parishioner bottom line being that nothing be done to jeopardize what we as a parish have today and are moving towards in the future.
- Parishioners are concerned about change within an institution with a rocky history when it comes to real parishioner involvement in the decision and change management process; parishioners are looking for meaningful involvement in executing any approved linkage.
- Neither a carte blanche replacement or an uninformed force fit of pastors makes sense when the Archdiocese needs to build trust and confidence with its members.

Today, St. Catherine of Alexandria Parish of Westford, Massachusetts is a vibrant, flourishing parish with 1845+ individuals at weekly mass, an annual offertory collection of $700,000, and 38 ministries with over 1300 active participants providing support to these ministries. Ministry support has doubled since 2005. St. Catherine ministry involvement goes beyond its parish boundaries and the Merrimack Valley area. It includes spiritual and service support to victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, tornadoes in Monson, Massachusetts, and poverty in the inner city of Newark, New Jersey and the Appalachian Region. In Mississippi alone, 650 participants in our Youth Ministry have
provided over 13,500 hours of prayer and spiritual support plus 20,000 hours of service since 2007.

Our growth in parish vitality is driven by the example and caring leadership of our pastor, Father Peter Quinn. His presence and guidance, spiritual nourishment, connection to the community, strong commitment to social justice and transparency in decision-making has fostered a clear sense of mission; growth in parish spirituality, stewardship, and service; an increased presence and impact within our community; and a strong belief in the future of our parish. He has moved us from survival to maintenance to a mission focus.

Many longtime, active parishioners viewed our prior pastoral leadership as minimally effective. These parishioners do agree that prior to 2006 we had one very involved and respected parochial vicar/role model who reached out to all parishioners. This parishioner experience spans the 1965 – 2012 timeframe. In their view until 2006 the good that happened was typically driven by a few dedicated parishioners and staff. Their memories are of few ministries and limited priestly presence. They believe that a general lack of active leadership and priestly presence/connection contributed to disillusionment and doubt that led to an out migration of some parishioners. Also, their experience was that despite parental involvement and support, many young adults began to question the relevance of Catholicism and dropped out as active members when they headed off to college. This was in the 80s and 90s prior to any clergy sex abuse scandal or church closings. Many have not returned. These parishioners noted that they wished their children had the opportunity to be influenced by our current pastor and parochial vicar. They wonder how today’s positive priestly role models and robust youth programs may have affected these young adults in terms of their views on Catholicism and church relevance in today’s world. Other individuals believe firmly that it is the parishioners, not the priests who define the parish and create its vitality. The truth is most likely a blending of each view.

With regards to the APPC proposal, trust in the Archdiocese administration remains an issue. While the majority of parishioners appreciate the need for a new pastoral service approach, many of these same parishioners feel that the Archdiocesan attempt at transparency is a smoke screen with the fundamental decisions already made. Parishioners believe that St Catherine Parish is well positioned (e.g., weekly mass attendance, offertory, demographic trends/projections, sacramental index numbers) to
sustain (and enhance) our existing, vibrant parish community as an individual parish entity. However, parishioners understand the broader perspective that Cardinal Sean must take and view the linkage of St Catherine and St Anne parishes as a reasonable option to address emergent Archdiocesan-wide issues. That said parishioners sense that the initial planning and alignment of parishes is the easy part. Leadership, communication, people skills and an understanding of our parish history, culture, and traditions will be critical to successfully navigating the change in pastoral leadership, council management bodies, and organizational restructuring necessary to create a viable and sustainable cross-parish support structure, while minimizing the scope and duration of any disruptions and ensuring continued long-term parish vitality.

Parishioners are concerned about change within an institution with a rocky history when it comes to real parishioner involvement in the decision and change management process. While parishioners realize that change is coming, no one is willing to accept implementation decisions that adversely affect the progress made under Father Peter Quinn’s leadership. The days of blind allegiance to decisions made by a central administrative body are gone. Transparency, meaningful participation in the process, and leadership from a respected pastor, Parish Pastoral Council (PPC), Parish Finance and Administration Committee (PFC), pastoral staff, and key parishioners with a built up reservoir of good will are essential and critical elements to successful transition and collaborative vitality.

Moving forward, parishioners believe that retaining a well respected pastor from within the proposed collaborative will reduce potential disruption. The reality is that no one wants Father Peter to leave. With the planned departure of our Parochial Vicar in June 2012 this would represent a 100% cleric turnover and loss of parish knowledge among our assigned priests. If the pastor leaves, parishioners want a say in the pastor selection and replacement process. They prefer a phased transition approach for the overall Archdiocesan transition effort with a continuous focus on applying lessons learned. In regards to St Catherine Parish, the parishioners believe that current leadership i.e., Father Peter, the PPC, and the PFC, should determine when it is most appropriate to implement any proposed parish linkage. Parishioners and the PPC believe that the processes for establishing a cross parish PPC and PFC needs to be well thought out as these two committees will play a central role in: moving the process forward; creating an atmosphere of fairness in establishing a new service framework; and working with the pastor to staff the new framework. This is even more critical if new pastoral leadership is in place.
The parishioner bottom line is that nothing be done to jeopardize what we have today and are moving towards in the future. Our sense of mission and community, our focus on contemporary worship for the young and evangelization of the lapsed, and commitment to community outreach ministries must be nurtured, strengthened, and preserved in any linkage. Building on our strengths and those of other parishes and avoiding a homogeneous blending are essential to growth in numbers, service and impact. Father Peter is known to both parishes. He is the best person to meet these challenges for St Anne and St. Catherine parishes. He is fair, transparent, and skilled in building consensus on tough decisions. These attributes are in addition to his remarkable ability to spiritually nurture parishioners of all ages.

**Detail Feedback**

The APPC has developed a collaborative concept that looks to the best possible partnerships between parishes to meet the goal of improving evangelization.

1. Does the combination we are proposing for the Parish you are associated with seem to meet this goal of improving evangelization? (Why? Why Not?)

   Given that a linkage with the Groton geographical area directly bordering Westford (i.e., former Sacred Heart Parish) is not feasible because of past consolidations, it is most likely the best option for these two parishes. The linkage of these two parishes seems logical given that some synergy already exists between the two faith communities. It will not be a cake walk. Challenges will exist.

   **Why it might not work:** Research by the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP) indicates that evangelization is more likely to happen in communities characterized by like minded people with similar education levels, family composition, and income. In this regard, Groton and Westford are more closely aligned than Westford and Littleton. New leadership with little understanding of, or appreciation for, the parish culture, history, and norms will be prone to missteps. These missteps, in the absence of a reservoir of trust and support, can quickly create a negative environment. A pastor named Father Peter Quinn (or possibly his clone) could significantly reduce or eliminate the overall linkage risk from a St Catherine perspective and we believe a St Anne perspective.

   The move towards a “new evangelization”, where non-priests play a central role, is a foreign concept to many traditional Catholics; often these traditional Catholics are a major source of stewardship support e.g., time, talent, treasure. The bottom line is that
this service shift may not resonate well with a large segment of practicing Catholics for some time. In a parish-wide survey we conducted in 2010 which had over 600 responses, the data indicated clearly that the health and well being of our priests, parishioner spiritual fulfillment, priestly presence at sacramental services (e.g., funerals, outreach to those in need) were of fundamental importance to our parishioners. In terms of comfort level with potential changes outlined in the survey, it was clear that many potential changes challenged our parishioners’ sense of comfort. For example, parishioners were “not at all comfortable” with mass via video feed into the Parish Hall (60%), deacon-led funeral services versus a mass (45%), combining a weekday and funeral mass (45%), or a trained lay person officiating at either graveside (48%) or wake services (34%). Twice as many responders were “not at all comfortable” with each of these potential changes than were “very to extremely comfortable”.

**Why it might work:** The CCSP studies indicate that Congregations with a clear mission, uplifting and nurturing worship services and a strong commitment to community and social issues show a dramatic increase in appeal to new members. In the past six years St Catherine of Alexandria in Westford has become a vibrant parish community. Our strategic plan lays out a clear mission focus to enhance and expand our parish community, develop our ministries and expand their impact, and focus on our youth and young adults to create the next generation of Catholic leaders.

While we have some ongoing activities with St Anne, it would be presumptuous to categorically state where St Anne falls in this regard. Based on what we know, we believe that, if provided with strong pastoral leadership and adequate staffing to maintain its vibrant parish life, this collaborative will eventually flourish.

**Why do we feel this way?** St. Anne is a parish which shares similar types of parishioners, similar vibrancy, and similar goals as they relate to evangelization. Over the years, these two parishes have proactively pursued opportunities to collaborate. Examples include RCIA, Youth Ministry, and various service outreach efforts. In addition, our priests have provided mass support coverage. Over the past several years, this collaboration has sent over 650 young people and adult chaperones (from both parishes) on an annual service trip to Mississippi. The Westford contingent has provided over 13,500 hours of spiritual support and 20,000 hours of service support. This service venture has grown from a small group of individuals to its current size due to the dedication and cooperation of leaders and youth from both parishes. Such
endeavors exemplify the potential for other complementary ventures between these two parishes and their respective parishioners. (See Question 2 for more details.)

**Why does any linkage (and more precisely a priest shortage) concern us when it comes to evangelization and pastoral service?** Our pastor and a full time parochial vicar at St. Catherine’s are extremely busy. During the Parochial Vicar’s 2010/2011 sabbatical and illnesses we needed to scale back the Pastor’s duties and availability. Parishioners were not happy. Some went elsewhere. Under Archdiocesan principles i.e., Criteria 4 – “1600 Mass Attendees per Weekend …” it appears that the cluster would have a pastor and no full time parochial vicar. The pastor would be servicing one community of 2600 families and approximately 1845 weekend mass attendees (Source: 2011 Pilot Catholic Directory Parish Statistics), plus another with 1300 families and 674 mass attendees (Source: 2011 … Parish Statistics). Our 2010/11 experience indicates that the road to a more accepting, evangelizing, financially stable community in the proposed St Anne/St Catherine collaborative will not be smooth sailing from Day 1. Compromises far more challenging than what we proposed in 2010 will need to be made. Are our current members willing to accept these changes and help evangelize? The answer is most likely not a resounding yes. The core parishioners will move forward. As a church community the non core members will play a key role in continuing to reverse the prior downturn in attendance or creating further erosion in numbers. They need to be evangelized as well.

2. **Remembering that our objectives are to be more welcoming, nourishing, thriving and evangelizing communities than we already are. What are the advantages of this combination, not only for your parish but for the parishes included in your collaborative?**

As mentioned in Question 1, it is our opinion that the proposed collaborative would result eventually in a robust faith community primed for evangelization. We feel strongly that in order to foster the strength of this grouping, the placement of a skilled and well respected leader with people skills as pastor is imperative. With two strong parishes working together under the guidance of a gifted pastor, we feel that we can accomplish more together than either community would be able to achieve alone. Key advantages of the proposed clustering should include better leveraging of ideas and human capital; reduced burnout of ministry participants, and availability of additional funds to enhance current critical services and/or introduce new services that are essential to evangelization, youth programs, and mission expansion.
A key advantage of the proposed clustering between St. Anne’s and St. Catherine’s is that we are already working successfully with St. Anne’s on several activities. The Youth Ministry Mississippi Mission Trip has been a joint venture for 5 years. This past year the two parishes collaborated to provide support via the Monson Mission Trip to individuals and families in Western Massachusetts who were affected adversely by the tornadoes and October ice storms. Also, each parish supports Lazarus House initiatives. Currently, the St. Vincent de Paul and Youth Ministry at St. Catherine’s are in a joint planning stage to establish a St. Vincent de Paul Youth Group. Our hope is to establish a team of service-minded youth who meet regularly to plan and execute faith-based service activities in our area. Down the road, this could be another area of strong collaboration with St. Anne’s. In addition, our two parishes interact on the RCIA program and are exploring the feasibility of bringing the ACTS retreat to their parishes in 2013. This retreat experience might serve as a foundational element to facilitate parish integration and enhance the probability that the Archdiocesan objectives can be accomplished in a more timely and minimally contentious environment.

The St. Catherine’s strategic planning effort and 2010 Parish Survey feedback supports the PPC belief that, as we move towards a collaborative parish service model, parishioner understanding of the Archdiocesan/Parish challenges and constraints plus parishioner informed input are key elements in making decisions to ensure that we nurture multi-parish vibrancy, balance priestly presence and involvement in sacramental and non-sacramental areas, and ensure our priests health and well-being. (See Question 3 for more info)

3. What are the possible problems with the parishes we are proposing collaborating/sharing a pastoral staff together? Please share any real pitfalls you could identify. (Please share any historical, social, or cultural information that should be taken into consideration.) Is there any kind of information you would need to be supplied to you, to help you provide a fuller answer to this question?

The initial strategic planning and alignment of parishes is the easy part. The implementation will not be easy. Leadership, communication, people skills and an understanding of the parish and community culture will be critical to the change management and organizational restructuring necessary to create a viable and sustainable cross-parish support structure. Most likely, moving from the current structure to the new model will create anxiety, tension, and resistance. None of our ongoing collaborative efforts threaten current staff positions, availability/access to priests, or the perceived “perks” of leadership that a non-staff, non-paid layperson in
charge of a ministry may sense from their experience. Moving forward, for parishioners, fear of the unknown and resistance to change must be managed. For current staff, we will need to address their fear of potential job loss. Also, we need to address potentially different operating philosophies between the parishes. Managing the transition, involving the staff/parishioners, and continuously communicating, accepting feedback, and adjusting plans, when appropriate, are essential elements to mitigate these risks.

Our parish is already moving from maintenance to a mission mode and there are concerns that there may be a loss of momentum. Will we need to slow down in order to ‘catch up’ a newly linked parish? While this is not very Christian, it IS very human. This concern may exist in other parishes

Our parish draws parishioners from a wide geographical area consisting of 19 communities including Westford, Chelmsford, Groton, Littleton, and Tyngsboro. Eighty-two percent of registered parishioners are from Westford with Groton being the next largest community (8%). Demographic differences and parochialism can create barriers in any linkage. For example, Westford is comprised of multiple villages (e.g., Forge, Graniteville, Nabnasset, Parker). While the number of Westford newcomers well exceeds the number of life-long and long-term residents, some geographic/village and old/new parochialism still exists in our community. In addition, parishioners, both new and old are very protective of the sacramental and non-sacramental services provided and very concerned, as we found out in 2010, with any real or perceived changes. Whether the collaborative is one of equals or a combination of a strong parish and less strong parishes, the implementation is bound to have problems. In some situations, retaining a well-respected, savvy pastor may make the difference between achieving OR failing to achieve the desired Archdiocesan goals. In the absence of a reasonable, respected guiding force, the process will take longer and the collaborative could end up weaker than its parts. The Archdiocese really needs to listen to the parishes and understand what the people feel is in their best interests if it is going to replace the current pastor. Carte blanche replacement or an uninformed force fit do not make sense when the Archdiocese needs to build trust and confidence with its members. Parishioners do not believe it is a winning strategy for the parishes or the Archdiocese. Placement decisions need to respect special circumstances, the incumbent pastor’s desire, and the feelings of the parishioners.
While the proposed collaboration of St. Anne’s of Littleton and St Catherine of Alexandria in Westford should proceed on a smoother trajectory than some others, obstacles e.g., turf, fear of job loss, different operational cultures, will exist. The process for establishing a joint PPC and PFC needs to be well thought out. Most likely, these joint committees will play a central role in moving the process forward, creating an atmosphere of fairness in establishing a new administrative/operational framework, and working with the pastor, as appropriate, to staff the new framework. If the current PPC’s and PFC’s have different frameworks and operational modes, e.g., empowered versus rubber stamp, dozens of members versus a manageable number, consensus versus dictatorial, then the creation of an effective collaborative PPC and PFC will be more difficult. This is where a respected incumbent pastor can serve the process well. Naturally, he will need to be willing to take on the challenge.

Finally, revenues and interest in non-ministry stewardship could take an initial hit. Mass attendance preference and reluctance to travel may create rather than ameliorate financial pressure in the cluster. For example, getting parishioners from either parish to “travel” to a mass, function or ceremony in the other parish will be a challenge. Many St Catherine parishioners live much closer to St. John’s, St Mary’s or St Irene’s than St Anne’s. Many St Anne’s parishioners may live closer to St. Elizabeth’s in Acton. People (maybe it’s a Catholic thing) like convenience. This belief is based on experience during our parochial vicar’s sabbatical and with the cluster-wide Lenten programs in years past. We would suggest that on line giving and/or use of one’s parish envelopes be strongly encouraged regardless of the church attended. Also, implement a mandated business practice for the “return” of envelope money to the donor’s parish.

4. Remembering the general criteria set out in order to achieve the ideas of Fairness, Partnership, Financial Viability, and Pastoral Effectiveness, do you have comments on the criteria used or ways to improve the 6 measurements discussed during our session?

It is obvious that much thought went into development of the general criteria and measurement to move towards an effective mission-based pastoral service model for all parishes. It would seem nearly impossible to develop criteria that everyone fully embraces and supports 100%. Your effort seems very reasonable from our perspective which is that all parishes need to be raised up to meet the challenges being faced within the Archdiocese of Boston.

5. Keeping the criteria used and the overall goals in mind, do you have a better idea about parish combinations with your parish that seem more workable to you, and why?
By the numbers, St Catherine could be a stand-alone parish. We realize that if St. John and St. Mary in Chelmsford are being linked that the handwriting is on the wall. We reviewed the major single parish options in the APPC plan. Unique situations like sheer size e.g., St Michael (North Andover), parishes staffed by an Order e.g., St William (Tewksbury), or political sensitivity e.g., St Mary (Scituate) appear to be the overriding reason for maintaining a stand-alone parish. If the Archdiocese chooses to solve the Our Lady of Grace (Pepperell) concern by linking St Anne (Littleton) with St Mary (Ayer) and St Anthony (Shirley), then a linkage of St Catherine (Westford) and St Mary Magdalen (Tyngsboro) would seem to be the only viable non stand-alone option. From a workability perspective, we would be starting from ground zero. While we are less than 10 miles apart and some current parishioners (4%) live in Tyngsboro, geographical issues exist. St Mary Magdalen Parish is on the other side of the Merrimack River. Access from Westford requires going over a well traveled single access bridge.

6. Are there other criteria that should be taken into account specific to your parish and geography?

Informed common sense, not the rigid application of criteria, must prevail in addressing any linkage. For example, how the APPC calculates and uses a sacramental index in its decision making criteria needs to be explored. Not all elements are of equal importance in meeting the APPC challenges of evangelization and retention of the young as they grow older. Within our parish, First Communions and Confirmations are priority areas for our priests. It is their personal interaction with the young via focused liturgy services/masses, small group dinners, and working side by side in Mississippi that has helped the town deal with several tragedies and created a sense of social responsibility within a large segment of our teenage population. Our priests are known and respected. Your overall approach needs to recognize this type of subjective criteria that may be difficult to measure. Many firms on Wall St. focused solely on the numbers and look where it led them. Look into the heart of the successful parishes and you'll find priests who truly care and have time to know their parishioners and parishioners who appreciate their priests' spiritual leadership and commitment to the parish community.

7. We would be receptive to any general suggestions about multi-parish pastoring that you feel would help the APPC in making its ultimate recommendation to Cardinal Sean and the Diocese. (Please use the other side of this sheet!)

Current pastors who believe in autocratic rule need to be flushed from their positions. The days of blind allegiance to decisions made by a central administrative body or an autocratic pastor are gone. Transparency, meaningful participation in the process,
and leadership from a respected pastor, Parish Pastoral Council (PPC), Parish Finance and Administration Committee (PFC), pastoral staff, and key parishioners with a built up reservoir of good will are essential and critical elements to successful transition and collaborative vitality.

In making pastoral assignments, the Archdiocese should give serious consideration to the performance of a pastor (i.e., overall health of his parish) over recent history (e.g., 5 years) and allow those with a high performance a say in where they end up. Also, the Archdiocese should take steps to gather and consider what parishioners feel are the optimum characteristics of a new pastor.

The new pastor of any PST will need to be skilled with people and managing personalities as well as experienced and familiar with what it takes to run a parish. Similarly, the pastoral associate will need to be similarly good with people as the individual will come from one of the parishes in the group and must earn the respect of the others. The mechanisms e.g., an interview process and a selection committee, for the pastoral associate (and possibly other positions) must be clear, unbiased and transparent.

In transitioning, the Archdiocese should consider keeping all pastoral associates that already are in place for a reasonable time period. The PST could move to one after a period of time. It would be important to have stability of the other staff members at each parish to ensure that critical institutional knowledge e.g., process, culture, contacts, doesn’t get lost in the transition to a PST.

Also, the APPC needs to focus some attention on the 2nd level linkages that will serve as the backup strategy to ensure delivery of mass and sacramental services. For example, if the collaborative only has a pastor, what does a parish do when the pastor becomes ill on Christmas Eve? If the Archdiocese does not have a support structure/backup position in place the result could be chaos that leads to more dissatisfaction, setbacks in evangelization, and active parishioner defection.

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