



DIOCESE *of* GAYLORD

Parish Leader Q&A — Pastoral Plan 2026

1. Why is the diocese doing this now?

Our diocese—and the Church across the U.S.—is experiencing real shifts: Mass attendance and sacramental practice have declined since the 1970s, and the number of priests has fallen by more than 40% nationwide. Many local churches are smaller, and most priests already serve multiple parishes. Pastoral planning helps us look honestly at these realities and prepare for a mission-focused future.

2. Did the bishop create the Pastoral Plan 2026 alone?

The bishop is responsible for the final plan, but it was formed through the synodal process; in-depth review of parish data; input from parish finance and pastoral councils, parish leaders, priests, deacons and directors of parish life; and of course, prayer. This has been a deliberate, collaborative process with input from hundreds of other sources—not rushed or done in isolation.

3. What is being announced and when does it start?

The bishop announced the Diocese of Gaylord's Pastoral Plan 2026 on Jan. 20, 2026, with implementation beginning this July. The diocesan Pastoral Plan 2026 webpage outlines a timeline that moved from early data collection and spring vicariate meetings into drafting and consultation, culminating in a public announcement before implementation. To read the complete plan, visit

DioceseofGaylord.org/PastoralPlan2026.

4. What kinds of changes are included?

The plan includes parish closures, parishes becoming limited-use churches, new parish clusters and updated clergy assignments. These changes are being implemented to sustain sacramental life and strengthen the mission of the Church. Complete vicariate-specific lists—parish names, cluster compositions and clergy assignments—is posted on the diocesan website. Visit DioceseofGaylord.org/PastoralPlan2026.

At-a-glance diocese highlights:

– Closures: 2; Limited use: 20; New parish clusters: 18 – all of which have three or fewer parishes;
Structures unchanged: 17

– Priests with altered assignments: 29; Parochial vicars with altered assignments: 2; Directors of Parish Life/Sacramental Ministers with positions affected: 3/3

– Starting July 2026, the diocese staff will include: 29 Pastors; 2 Priest Administrators; 10 Parochial Vicars; 29 Deacons; 8 Seminarians; 3 Directors of Parish Life, 3 Sacramental Ministers

- Total Catholic schools: 16 - unchanged
- Total parishes in July 2026: 56

5. What is the difference between “parish” and “church”?

A parish is a portion of the people of God in a defined territory under the guidance of a pastor who is responsible for the care of their souls. A church is a physical structure which has been dedicated for divine worship.

6. Why closures or limited-use designations?

Rightsizing the Diocese of Gaylord helps ensure access to the sacraments throughout the diocese, creates reasonable workloads for priests, ensures financial stewardship and safeguards long-term viability—criteria that helped guide the diocesan planning efforts.

“Limited use” means the church will not have regular weekend Masses. Upon request and with pastor’s discretion, weddings, baptisms and funerals can be celebrated at a limited-use church. In addition, limited-use churches will be used for special liturgies (e.g., traditional Latin Masses at St. Thomas Aquinas Church, Elmira), special parish ministries (e.g., All Saints Center for Charity in St. Bernard Church, Alpena) or Mass during peak summer months (e.g., St. Ignatius Church in Good Hart). Visit DioceseofGaylord.org/PastoralPlan2026 for a complete list of limited-use churches by vicariate in the full Pastoral Plan 2026.

7. How were parishes selected for closure or limited use?

These decisions were complex, and there was no simple formula applied. It required an in-depth analysis of diocesan and parish data -- like Mass attendance, finances, geography and projections – combined with the consultative feedback gathered through the vicariate synodal process along with prayer and a vision of faithful stewardship for the gift of the Catholic Church. The bishop’s November letter and the pastoral planning web page describe this blend of data and prayerful consultation.

8. What about clustering – how is it changing?

Today, some clusters group four or five parishes, which stretch clergy and make sustained presence difficult. Under the new plan, clusters are three or fewer parishes, with most clusters at two parishes. This, along with updated clergy assignments, including support from parochial vicars, many of whom are our international priests, is meant to balance workloads so priests can be more present to their people and parish life can flourish.

9. Will my parish close?

There are 2 parishes that will close and 20 other parishes moving to limited-use churches. Many parishes will enter a new cluster while others will be unchanged. The vicariate-specific lists—including parish names and clusters—is included in the complete Pastoral Plan 2026 on the diocesan website. Visit

DioceseofGaylord.org/PastoralPlan2026. Please review those details for your parish and neighboring communities.

10. What does this mean for Mass times, ministries and schedules?

Within each cluster, pastors will coordinate Mass schedules so priests can serve effectively, and parishioners have access to the sacraments. Ministries will be encouraged to collaborate across cluster partners. Changes in schedules, especially for new clusters, will be communicated as implementation nears.

11. How will the diocese support those who are grieving?

Bishop Walsh has acknowledged the sorrow many feel when a parish closes or changes. Parishioners can submit comments and questions through the website comment form; all submissions will be responded to and shared with Bishop Walsh. Parishes will be encouraged to offer listening sessions, hospitality and pastoral care during the transition (February through the summer), and leaders are asked to welcome those who may join their communities. Reminder, we are never abandoned – new communities await.

12. How does this connect to “Love, Communion and Mission”?

As we implement the plan, Bishop Walsh invites us to embrace the future with the credo *Love, Communion, Mission*. Love in conversation and action, Eucharistic communion with Christ and each other, and missionary discipleship that send us out as Pilgrims of Hope. This credo is reflected on the diocesan Pastoral Plan 2026 web page and in the bishop’s messaging. Please take time to read and reflect on the scripture passages, noted in the Pastoral Plan introduction, which correspond to the credo.

13. What is being done about vocations?

The diocese launched a vocations strategy, in partnership with Vianney Vocations, in spring 2025. A team of priests were appointed to walk with men through the discernment process. Various vocation programs, like the *Called by Name* campaign, have been created to help identify faith-filled men who are discerning God’s call. A variety of events are scheduled for men to learn more information about priestly vocations. A new website was launched to raise awareness of the priesthood and accompany men in discernment. This has been a serious investment of time, talent and treasure.

14. What is being done for a lay formation program?

A lay formation program is slated to relaunch in 2026 to equip parishioners for ministry and leadership. It was overwhelmingly clear from the vicariate meetings, there is a hunger for lay formation and education along the lines of the former “Center for Catholic Studies.” A similar model will be developed. It was also overwhelmingly clear that we need to provide enriching experiences of faith for our young people. The bishop

is hopeful to establish a “Bishop’s Youth Advisory Council” and develop a leadership training retreat program for youth and young adults.

15. Are Catholic schools affected?

The Pastoral Plan 2026 indicates schools remain unchanged at this time. Future adjustments, if any, would come only after extensive research and collaboration.

16. What happens to parish registrations and sacramental records?

When parishes close or are designated limited use, registrations typically transfer to the receiving parish; however, each parishioner will ultimately decide which parish they would like to be registered at. The sacramental records are preserved by diocesan and canon law norms. The receiving and closing parishes/limited-use churches will be provided specific instructions.

17. What about sacred art, memorials and cemeteries?

Diocesan offices (Worship, Archives/Chancery) oversee the reverent transfer or disposition of sacred items at parishes that are closing. In most cases, some sacred items from the closing parish will be transferred to the receiving parish.

No sacred items are moved from limited-use churches.

Cemeteries retain their dignity and oversight; the clustered parishes will continue to care for any cemeteries associated with a parish that is closing or designated limited use. Parish leaders should consult the Office of the Chancery for parish-specific guidance.

18. What if circumstances change (a priest becomes ill, retires early, or dies)?

No plan can anticipate every scenario. If a single pastor were to become unavailable, additional adjustments would be necessary. The diocese will communicate promptly and accompany affected communities.

19. How can I stay informed and help parishioners do the same?

- a) Read the bishop’s letter, watch his video and review the complete plan with vicariate and parish-specific details like the listing of closures, limited use, clusters and clergy assignments.
- b) Encourage prayer, welcome our brothers and sisters and participate in listening sessions.
- c) Keep conversations charitable, accurate and hopeful—rooted in Divine Providence.