

Diocese of Gaspé

**REPORT ON
THE PRESENT SITUATION AND THE FUTURE
OF OUR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES
IN THE GASPÉSIE AND MAGDALEN ISLANDS**

**81 % of our fabriques believe
that the *status quo* is no longer possible.**

**Therefore, how shall we engage together
into a turning point now?**

**Reflection Group on the present situation
and the future of our Christian communities**

September 2013

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THE BISHOP'S MESSAGE

Just as it has happened several times over the past few centuries of our history in the Gaspésie and Magdalen Islands, our Catholic population has to **reposition** itself with regard to our Church's organization and life. Following a missionary period where Jesuit and Capuchin priests came to serve the needs of a population of fishermen and to the Natives, priests from the Diocese of Quebec established themselves in areas with a denser population while they went around to attend to the needs of neighboring populations as well.

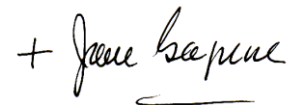
Then, in 1860, fourteen Christian communities were erected into parishes with a resident priest and the building of more stable institutions : churches, cemeteries, rectories, often followed by schools and hospitals with the coming of religious congregations to operate them. That is how the picture of the Church in the Gaspésie and Magdalen Islands has gradually grown to be what it has been until the middle of the 1960's.

But then, profound social changes came about over that period we call «the quiet revolution» : a rise of living standards, increased education and schooling, gradual decrease in the birth rate, departure of a good portion of our youths for other places, influence of modern culture largely spreading out through the media. Such new context has brought about major changes to our life styles in our midst.

Such that today Catholics in our Church must reposition themselves in the way they live out their faith and examine the various community institutions which they built in another era, considering in so doing a number of factors, such as: a different understanding of Christian practise, smaller families, decrease in the population, churches that are now too big for the local needs, etc.

Considering all those changes, we can say, it seems to me, that **our Church in this place has reached a turning point**. That is why, in conversation with the Council for temporal administration of the Diocese of Gaspé, we have come to the conclusion that it is time for us to launch a serious study of the administrative and financial reality of all the parishes of our diocese.

The document we present to you today provides an overall assessment of the findings and questions formulated by our fabrique administrators. Following a reading of this report at fabrique meetings, we shall present the report to the people in general meetings that will soon take place in every region of the diocese. Your own reflections will be most important so we may be in a position to face our future together with realism and hope.



† Jean Gagnon
Bishop of Gaspé

PRESENTATION OF THE REPORT

A regional conference on our religious heritage was held at Carleton-sur-Mer in May 2011. On that occasion, our bishop Jean Gagnon was invited to speak on the present situation of our Church, namely on the future of our churches in the Gaspésie and Magdalen Islands. He then announced he was planning to set up in the fall on 2011 a committee that would formulate a reflection guide to be used as an assessment tool by our fabrique administrators. The guide meant to help them assess the present situation of each fabrique while they would look ahead to the future of their church and other buildings, as well as the future of their community.

Such move had been initiated in other dioceses throughout the province of Quebec, namely Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière and Joliette. We are most grateful to those two dioceses who graciously shared to us their own study guide.

Following this, a Reflection Group was appointed by the Bishop and the Council for the administration of temporal affairs of the Diocese of Gaspé, with the task of formulating a questionnaire adapted to our reality. The members of that reflection group are :

- Mr. Rémi Thibault, diocesan Finance Director and chair of the committee;
- Mrs. Jacqueline Ritchie, chair of the parish Fabrique in Chandler;
- Mr. Daniel Bernier, chair of the parish Fabrique at Cap-aux-Os;
- Mr. Noël Bourdages, Jean Carbonneau, Valmont Parent, members of the Diocesan Council for the administration of temporal affairs;
- Mrs. Suzanne Fournier, secretary at the diocesan offices, assumed that task with the Committee.

A long questionnaire was prepared and sent to the sixty-three (63) fabriques of the diocese in January of 2012. Were exempted from this task the two missions Kateri Tekakwitha (Maria) and Listuguj (Restigouche), as their administrative structure differs from the fabrique's. The forty-nine (49) items on the questionnaire dealt with the following realities : buildings, cemeteries, financial situation of the fabrique, use of buildings, membership of the community and related factors, other aspects bearing on the future. The last question called for an overall assessment of the present situation in connection with the conditions that would be needed for a viable future.

In his letter presenting this questionnaire, Bishop Gagnon wrote :

«The present detailed questionnaire is first and foremost addressed to you. Its intention is to help you, administrators of the goods of the fabrique, take a serious look, as realistic as possible, on your fabrique's situation, describing its health record and that of your community. Such analysis will help you look into the future. It may also help you in planning out decisions, such as: informing the parishioners as precisely as possible, consulting them, avoiding to postpone urgently needed repairs on buildings, being alert to grasp opportunities that would help your fabrique, etc.

*[...] Let me be clear: **we have no hidden agenda at the diocesan level on those questions. The Bishop's position is always to make sure it is the parishioners who carry the main responsibility with regard to their community.** And we still believe that a vibrant parish remains an important point of reference for one's identity and local vitality, on both the legal and religious levels.*

Participation of the fabriques in this operation was absolutely remarkable: **55 fabriques out of 63, hence 87%, have answered the questionnaire and sent it back to the diocesan Finance Director.** And the results were compiled by volunteers, with the contribution of the diocesan secretarial staff.

Hence the present report reflects the findings and observations of the majority of the fabriques in the Diocese of Gaspé on the following items :

- The faith communities : overall picture and organization;
- Churches, rectories, cemeteries;
- Financial situation and financing methods;
- Projection for the future of both the faith communities and their legal aspects;
- General comments formulated by the fabriques.

The information contained in this report are not based on any «scientific analysis». But they have the merit of representing the reflections and concrete experience of many persons concretely committed in our communities. Those people, through their team work, have accomplished the generous and serious task of putting into words what is going on in their parish, and they have had the courage to look forward to the future with a good degree of realism. The members of the Reflection Group on the present situation and future of our faith communities in the Diocese of Gaspé are most grateful to all those collaborators.

1. THE FAITH COMMUNITIES: WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE, HOW THEY OPERATE

FINDINGS AND STATISTICS

1.1 STATISTICS

1.1.1 The 63 parishes and 2 missions of the diocese have been grouped into 14 pastoral sectors representing between 2 and 8 parishes each. Sixteen priests have pastoral charge of all the parishes in those sectors: eight being priests of the Diocese of Gaspé (average age 62), four being diocesan priests from Columbia and Bénin (average age 41) and four being members of religious congregations (average age 67). One priest from Montreal (age 71) and another one from Bénin (age 56) help regularly in two pastoral sectors. In addition, twelve priests from the Diocese of Gaspé are retired but provide occasional collaboration in the sectors of their residence; their average age is 80.

1.1.2 The Catholic population of the Diocese of Gaspé is reviewed annually based on the statistical report sent by the fabriques. As of December 31 2011, the Catholic population of the 65 communities (parishes and missions) was 80 027 spread out as follows:

Population	Parishes	%
5 000 and above	2	3 %
3 000 – 5 000	2	3
2 000 – 3 000	11	17
Sub-total : 2 000 and above	15	23 %
1 500 – 2 000	4	6
1 000 - 1 500	11	17
Sub-total : 1 000 – 2 000	15	23 %
500 - 1 000	15	23 %
200 – 500	12	19
Below 200	8	12
Sub-total – 500 and below	20	31 %
GRAND TOTAL	65	100

1.1.3 Based on the data gathered by the 2012 questionnaire, the following facts appear to stand out :

- a. Over the past five years, the population has gone down in three-fourth of the communities.
- b. Over the past five years, the number of Catholics regularly attending mass on Sunday had gone down in 87% of the parishes.
- c. In most of the parishes, more than half of the faithful who attend Sunday mass on a regular basis are 65 years of age or over.

1.2 FABRIQUE MEMBERSHIP

1.2.1 Membership by age groups

An overall view of the members of the fabriques (administrators) by age groups shows this : those aged 20-40 (3%), aged 40-60 (38%), above 60 (59%).

1.2.1 Sharing of responsibilities (tasks)

- a. In slightly more than half the fabriques, members share tasks among themselves, «otherwise it would be impossible to operate».
- b. The main tasks shared among the fabrique members are : chairing the meetings, secretarial work, maintenance of buildings and grounds, maintenance of the cemetery, funding activities, insurance, heating the church, bookkeeping, relationship with other organizations, counting the weekly collection.
- c. One fabrique mentioned that all its members participate actively in the funding drives and that the other tasks are shared between teams of 2 to 3 churchwardens. In other places, all the members work together and when a special need arises, the fabrique delegates one member to assess the situation and report to the membership at a later fabrique meeting.
- d. One fabrique has drafted in 2006 a «calendar of the tasks and responsibilities»; at the beginning of the year it serves as a reference to entrust the tasks to each member of the fabrique.

1.3 RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS AND PAID PERSONNEL

1.3.1 Recruiting volunteers

Depending on the type of service needed, calling on volunteers for specific tasks has become difficult in the following proportion:

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------------------|-----|
| a. | New churchwardens | 53% |
| b. | People for secretarial work | 56% |
| c. | Maintenance | 51% |
| d. | Collaboration(s) (ex. Collection) | 60% |

1.3.2 Recruiting paid personnel

Generally speaking, recruiting paid personnel is relatively easy in a good proportion of the fabriques. For instance, 61% of them say that it is easy to find someone for the secretariat and 74% say the same about maintenance people.

REFLECTION GROUP OBSERVATIONS

1. The population of our diocese is not big, yet it is spread out on a very large territory. Whether these be small or larger communities, the same question arises : can we still be assured of the vitality of each place ?

2. We cannot consider the «Sunday worship practise» of the people as a measuring factor of their attachment to their church. Let us only think that for a good number of centuries, many people would “see their priest” only once or twice during the year, if only he could go to their place.
3. The parish church has been and still remains today an important element that identifies a community and as such is a symbol of their attachment to their place: people come from other places to be married there, to have their child baptized or to bury their dead. And we cannot deny the sacredness people attach to the cemetery where a close relative has been buried, as is demonstrated by the fact that cemeteries that are now surrounded by the forest are still being visited and neatly maintained after forty years since the closure of the parish.
4. **94% of the fabriques are now chaired by lay people (one third are women) chosen by the churchwardens and appointed by the Bishop.**
5. As is the case with other community groups, parishes can rely on a large number of volunteers. But most cannot do without a minimum number of permanent employees, whether they be full time or part-time employees: for instance, the pastor, the secretary, a pastoral agent, the maintenance person.

RECOMMENDATIONS : It is recommended

1. That at the first fabrique meeting at the beginning of the year, the members draft a work plan; that they share various responsibilities among themselves so that everyone has only one part of the overall responsibility to carry through while all work in a team fashion. Fabriques could draft or be given a task description for each type of responsibility to be carried out.
2. That before the annual election exercise, the members reflect together on what type of competency is needed for such and such a position and to turn to various age groups for the persons needed.
3. That, in order to arouse interest and a mentality of belonging, clear information be given to the parishioners **at least twice a year** on : finances, challenges to be met, dangers or opportunities that are pointing out for the fabrique.
4. That Diocesan Services or other competent people organize formation programs for each pastoral sector to help foster recruitment of volunteers.

2. CHURCHES, RECTORIES, CEMETERIES

DATA AND STATISTICS

2.1 STATISTICS

2.1.1 Churches

One third of the fabriques foresee that major repairs are needed on their church. The others think that their church is in good shape and that minor repairs only will be needed.

2.1.2 Rectories

- a. On a general basis throughout the diocese, 34 fabriques out of 63 still own the rectory. Fifteen of those buildings serve as the pastor's residence, six are being leased to individuals or associations. The remaining number serve as residence for religious sisters, as parish offices or space for other parish activities.
- b. 20% of the fabriques which still own the rectory say those buildings need major repairs.

2.1.3 Cemeteries

- a. Most cemeteries are well maintained and need minor repairs only.
- b. Four fabriques say that the vacant cemetery spaces are presently too few.

2.2 OTHER PLACES FOR LITURGICAL CELEBRATIONS

One fourth of the fabriques use other places than the big church for their celebrations, like : the sacristy, church basement, recreation centre, etc. That is the case mostly during winter, so the heating costs are lessened.

2.3 OTHER COMPATIBLE USES OF THE CHURCH BUILDING

- a. In 2011, one half of the churches have been used for activities other than liturgies, such as concerts, shows, meetings, religious heritage exhibitions, arts symposium, etc.
- b. Added to those, fabriques say that the church serves for wakes and condolence before funerals, choir rehearsals, catechetics, sacramental preparations, etc.
- c. In 2011, the church in 55 parishes that filled in the questionnaire did serve about 900 times for activities other than the liturgy.
- d. And the fabriques received a rent for one third of those other activities.

2.4 EXISTING BUILDINGS

2.4.1 Statistics

- a. In over 80% of the faith communities, the present space available adequately meets their needs, and half of those buildings can easily be converted totally or in part.
- b. Half the fabriques think that the parish church could easily serve community needs in the area, in partnership with the municipality.

2.4.2 Potential partners

- a. Several fabriques have identified potential partners for the use of the church building, such as : municipalities, Knights of Columbus, Daughters of Isabella, Seniors' Clubs, other social clubs, activities for youths, MRC, SADC, CLD, and others.

- b. Other fabriques see potential partnerships with existing activities in the area, or suited to the specific vocation of their community: historical heritage, exhibition symposium on the arts, tourism, etc.
- c. Half the fabriques don't see any possibility of that kind for the moment, arguing that those organizations are already organized with regard to the space they need.

2.4.3 Additional data

- a. Some fabriques think that the church building could eventually be used for shows, conferences, exhibitions, library or theatres.
- b. Half the fabriques think that the municipality and the organizations spotted could contribute financially in the operation costs of the buildings, depending on the space used for their activities.
- c. Two fabriques only could identify a potential buyer of their church.

2.5 Is the *status quo* still possible?

Considering that the fabrique administrators know quite well the present situation of their parish, **81% of them are of the opinion that the *status quo* is no longer possible.** We must understand from this that an important majority of the fabriques can no longer meet by themselves the operation costs of the buildings they own. Hence the following reflection block will bring some light into this important awareness.

REFLECTION GROUP REMARKS

1. Most of the churches and rectories were built to meet the needs and conditions of another time. Sometimes (and often!) built on architectural plans of another era, these buildings have become much too big and are hardly convertible into something else. On the other hand, newer buildings can easily serve multipurpose needs.
2. A large number of rectories have been sold. Yet, we feel it is important to keep one rectory in good condition within each pastoral sector.
3. According to the diocesan Finance Director, rise of electricity costs brings an increase of heating costs, which is the main reason why a good number of fabriques are in deficit by the end of the fiscal year. **For the year 2012 electricity and heating costs (1.1 million \$) represent 17% of the fabriques' expenses.**
4. A fabrique is a corporation under the *Law respecting fabriques*. Its role is to administer the goods owned by the legally constituted faith community. Administrators enjoy an important degree of freedom in the administration of the parish goods. The Bishop has the degree of authority stipulated in the *Law*, like authorizing major expenses or repairs (5 000\$ and above), selling buildings, long term leases, loans that could imperil the fabrique's financial stability.

5. The goods a parish acquires must serve the goals it pursues: to provide for spiritual activities and prayer, and pastoral services as well. It is the fabrique (corporation) that owns those goods, not the parishioners. The fabrique administers property on the parishioners' behalf. Nor does the Bishop own those goods either, but he has the responsibility to make sure they are well administered.
6. The fabriques would be well advised to keep the cemetery money in a separate account so the real costs of their administration are made clear : maintenance, secretariat, burials, etc. This way fabriques are in a better position to assess the financial situation of the cemetery and set fees that are **fair to all of its users**, and not only to those who contribute regularly to their parish community.
7. The Diocesan Reflection Group highly appreciates the judgment of the fabrique administrators when they affirm that «the *status quo* is no longer possible» in a large number of parishes.

RECOMMENDATIONS : THE GROUP RECOMMENDS

5. That major repairs on buildings, even those done with the contribution of Religious Patrimony, never imperil the financial situation of the fabrique if such costs came to exceed the parishioners' capacity to meet the expenses. The prior authorization of the Bishop is always required.
6. That before any decision to make important and costly repairs on buildings, the fabrique members will make sure the community is given all the pastoral services it is entitled to receive in order to live out the faith: the presence of a pastor, the sacraments, catechetics, etc.
7. That fabriques consider establishing partnerships with local organizations for a better use of the buildings and and thereby increase their revenues.
8. That, as much as possible, the fabriques keep a distinct account for the cemetery and that the costs be assumed by all those who are using a plot.
9. That, in view of maintaining vibrant communities, information on the financial situation of the fabrique be given to public authorities in the locality.

A Reflection : that priority be given to the communities' faith life

The main concern of a Bishop is the vitality of the faith life in the Christian communities. Even when reduced to its strict minimum, a vibrant community could still exist without a church building for its usage. The future of the baptized does not depend first on the upkeep of churches, but rather on their capacity to witness to their faith in Jesus Christ and to integrate it into their lives. The Bishop is also preoccupied by the capacity of each community to take up its own responsibility, both administratively and pastorally. He thinks that the local interest for keeping churches is by far above the capacity of the proportion of people who attend their church regularly

Rémi Thibault, Diocesan Finance Director, *Reflections on the possibility of using the parish church for community activities in Bonaventure*, November 10, 2012.

3. FINANCIAL STATUS AND FUNDING MEANS

FINDINGS AND DATA

3.1 STATISTICS

3.1.1 The balance sheet of the fabriques for the entire diocese as of last December 31 2012 has the following information :

- a. **31 fabriques out of 63 (49%) closed the year with a deficit.** However, the deficit in 6 fabriques is due to major repairs done during the year.
- b. The net assets of the fabriques represents most of the time the amount of money still in the bank account, minus the loans and bills yet to be paid off; it does not reflect the value of buildings and land owned by the parish. The break up for the diocese is as follows :

Net Assets	Parishes	%
1000 000 \$ or more	11	18 %
50 000 to 100 000 \$	16	25
25 000 – 50 000 \$	15	24
Sub-Total : 25 000 \$ or more	42	67 %
10 000 – 25 000 \$	13	20
0 – 10 000 \$	5	8
Sub-Total : 0 - 25 000 \$	18	28 %
Negative assets	3	5
GRAND TOTAL	63	100 %

Based on the foregoing data, the net assets of one third of the fabriques is below 25 000 \$.

3.1.2 The answers to the questionnaire as given by the fabriques lead us to the following conclusions:

- a. As a whole, 2/3 of the fabriques think that their financial situation is healthy : those own an assets of 25 000 \$ or more. The remaining third of the fabriques feel that their financial situation is hard or even very precarious.
- b. **One third of the fabriques who feel they are in a bad financial situation causing serious concern** represent an important population (over 2 000 people).

3.2 TITHES

3.2.1 The purpose of the tithe

The tithe is a traditional form of monetary contribution to one's parish in the Catholic church. That money goes for pastoral services and support of pastors, and various administrative and material needs of the christian community. Consequently, each fabrique asks every member of the community to contribute regularly to its funding, as all the services in a parish are made available to everyone of its members.

3.2.2 Statistics

- a. The amounts received by way of the tithe constitute an important portion of the overall revenue of a parish and help maintain a balanced budget in 82% of the fabriques.
- b. The amounts raised with the tithe have gone down in 57 % of the fabriques.
- c. 57 % of the fabriques collect 50 % or more of the amount targeted.
- d. 10 % of the fabriques collect between 85% and 100% of the amounts targeted.
- e. 78 % of the fabriques feel that the campaign led by the diocese for this collection is good or very good.

3.3 ANNUAL COLLECTION IN PARISH-DIOCESE PARTNERSHIP

3.3.1 Purpose of this funding drive

This type of funding drive was initiated back in the year 2000. It is being conducted by a committee made up of people representing various parts of the diocese. Since 2002, the collection takes place on the first Sunday of October. A target amount is set for each parish, based on its Catholic population. The amounts collected up to the fixed target are shared between the diocese and the parish on a 50-50 basis. The parish that exceeds the amount expected receives 75% of the excess money collected. The diocese itself organizes the campaign and assumes the totality of its costs (documents, printing, the bishop's letter to be distributed to each family, the media, postage, etc) – this operation amounts to approximately 25 000 \$ yearly.

3.3.2 The data gathered by the diocese reveal the following facts :

- a. The twelve annual collections since 2000 have resulted in a bulk amount of over 3 million dollars (3 022 000 \$). This amount represents 98 % of the amount aimed at over those twelve years.
- b. Out of this amount, an amount of 1 522 000 \$ has been returned to the participating fabriques and 1 246 000 \$ has served to maintain diocesan services.
- c. Over the past five years, the collection has raised an average of 85 % of the amount targeted.

3.3.3 The fabriques' view of the collection

- a. 70 % of them feel that the annual collection is an important fund raising activity that helps maintain a balanced budget.
- b. 71 % say they are satisfied with the sharing between the diocese and the parishes.
- c. 75 % of the fabriques find it difficult to recruit volunteers for this campaign.

3.3.4 Some tips to improve participation in the collection

- a. In some of the parishes, someone goes from house to house.
- b. Some fabriques organize a local promotion: parish bulletin, even a promotion message issued by the municipality.
- c. Insistence on informing : information given at church on the nature and areas of services provided by both the diocese and the parish, information to parishioners on how the money is spent out.
- d. Other means : sending well known volunteers to specific area of the parish, arousing awareness on the need to volunteer for this essential drive, a thank you card sent to each volunteer who knock at every door, identification tags (badge, card) for volunteers.

3.3.5 Some remarks from the fabriques

- a. « Let the volunteers who go from house to house be assigned only a few families to call on »
- b. «Some families refuse to donate when they are told that the «collection is done jointly with the diocese»; they prefer to donate to their parish only.
- c. « The shared collection formula is an incentive for the fabrique and for the parishioners as well».

3.4 MEANS USED BY THE FABRIQUES TO IMPROVE THEIR FINANCES

3.4.1 Revenues

- a. To hold a local funding drive for a major project.
- b. Revision of fabrique fees from time to time : cost of cemetery plot lease, maintenance of the cemetery, contribution for fuel and heating of buildings, vigil lights, etc.
- c. Calling on seniors in the parish (OR former parishioners??) during the autumn financial drive.
- d. Personal letter to members of the community and businesses.
- e. Advertising on the parish bulletin
- f. Used clothing and flee markets
- g. Cards placed in the funeral homes inviting to make a donation to the fabrique when a death occurs in the parish.

- h. Special funding activities : meals, bake sales, the Knights «radiothon», concerts, drawings, etc.
- i. Setting up a special committee to plan out funding activities for the fabrique.

3.4.2 Expenses

- a. Stricter control over expenses
- b. Calling on volunteers for various tasks: secretariat, bookkeeping, maintenance of facilities in buildings, maintenance of grounds and the cemetery, etc.
- c. Better study of various needs brought forward by community members; number of parish bulletins to be printed, number of the misselette «Living with Christ», etc.
- d. Special arrangement during winter to reduce the heating costs and electricity.
- e. Better management of the heating system.

3.4.3 Comments

- a. «A good quality pastoral service in the parish is an encouragement for people to volunteer in different services».
- b. «Regular information provided to the parishioners arouses an awareness regarding finances and needs in the fabrique».
- c. « A reminder to parishioners, either through a letter or a phone call, that they are invited to pay their dues to the parish has given positive results».

REFLECTION GROUP REMARKS

1. Being in the service of the community, a fabrique must inform parishioners regularly on its financial situation **and thereby exercise valuable leadership.**
2. In order to maintain a healthy financial situation, there is need, not only to cut down on expenses, but also to diversify revenues and use new sources of income
3. Should the cost of plot reservation in the cemetery and maintenance fees be raised? Should there be a different range of fees for people who no longer live in the parish but still require services at the time of death (funerals, burials, etc.)? should there be special but fair fees for people who rarely contribute to the finances of their fabrique yet ask for some services? Should fabriques consider establishing various forms of partnership for a better use of its facilities?
4. Some parishes would do well by coming together for the financing of certain services like : secretariat, parish bulletin, maintenance of the cemetery, etc.
5. **A red light is being turned on** when a fabrique ends two or three successive years with a deficit such that it has no money left in the account to pay off its current bills.
6. Even if a fabrique still has a certain reserve fund, if it has put off for a long time some major and important repairs, can it be said to be in a good financial shape?

7. Every year, the annual collection committee provides all the fabriques with information about the various services that are offered by the diocesan offices.

RECOMMENDATIONS : The Committee recommends the following:

10. That each fabrique strive to reach a balanced budget annually. To this end, that they periodically study carefully their means of diversifying and increasing their sources of revenue.
11. That, wherever this is possible, the fabrique set up a **finance committee** consisting of competent and resourceful people who will search for new funding means.
12. That new funding means be tried out, like : donations to the fabrique on the event of a death in the parish, legacies, collection for a specific purpose like purchase of equipment, an urgent repair, support to religious education, refurbishing of a floor, etc.
13. **That each fabrique participate in the annual collection in solidarity with the other parishes and the diocese.**
14. That each fabrique abide by the requirement of the *Law Respecting Fabriques* regarding the obligation to present an annual financial report to parishioners “within 60 days of the end of the fiscal year” (Art. 32).
15. That each fabrique organize an annual meeting of information and dialogue with the parishioners regarding the results of the fiscal year, and submit current projects for their discussion and proposal so they will develop an interest in the life of their community.
16. That, in each pastoral sector, the pastor call meetings of the fabrique chairpeople for the purpose of sharing information and ideas on various items, especially human, material and financial resources, and that they plan out action together.

4. LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE OF THE FAITH AND CIVILIAN COMMUNITIES

FINDINGS AND DATA

The reflection that took place at the fabrique level has brought a large number of them (81%) to affirm, as a conclusion, that the *status quo* is no longer possible if they want to envision a financial security for the communities. Only a few fabriques remain optimistic and trust in a still workable future. All the others have identified several elements that threaten the survival of their communities and even the future of their village. It is those reflections that have led us to raise the question of an eventual grouping of parishes.

4.1 THREATS TO THE SURVIVAL OF THE COMMUNITY

4.1.1 Threats and challenges to the community

- a. Parishioners consistently contribute less money for the fabrique's operations.
- b. When the Sunday liturgy is a Liturgy of the Word, fewer people come to pray together and to celebrate the gifts of the Lord.
- c. The population is on a constant decrease and it is also constantly aging.
- d. The death of older people who did contribute with their donations leaves a vacuum that is not filled in by the younger generations.
- e. Some fabriques see that new comers into the parish or "summer parishioners" do not really feel they belong and hence have little or no interest in contributing to the financial operations of the parish.
- f. **The regular sources of revenue are going down: Sunday collections, tithe, fund raising activities, etc.**
- g. A large majority of the 50 years old or younger are not really motivated to engage in a regular participation in the life of the christian community.
- h. It is difficult to find volunteers for the fabrique, and the same applies to pastoral teams and various committees and other parish services as well.
- i. **The decrease in revenue is matched with a raise in the operation costs : salaries, heating, maintenance of buildings and grounds, etc.**
- j. The decreasing number of priests and the fast aging of those still in service is seen by the parishioners as a threat to the survival of their parish.
- k. Several communities have a hard time to gather a pastoral team that could help animate the community and assist in assuming its own inner responsibility.
- l. Rivalry between parishes is a hindrance to a beneficial collaboration among them.
- m. Growing individualism leads to a loss of understanding what a Christian community means.

4.1.2 Threats to the vitality of the civilian community

- a. High unemployment rate
- b. An important decrease of local economy
- c. Exodus of the young generations.
- d. Lack of "new blood" for local organizations

4.2 GROUPING (MERGING ?) OF SOME NEIGHBOURING PARISHES

4.2.1 Eventual groupings

Twenty-four (24) fabriques consider that merging with one or more parishes in their area might optimize the use of buildings.

4.2.2 Identifying a parish that would agree to such plan

One item in the questionnaire asked to identify one or more parishes in the area with which they would have close affinities

- a. 19 fabriques could identify one or more such parishes
- b. 4 parishes had conditional responses, like “on the condition that we would welcome that parish into ours”.
- c. 14 fabriques did not identify any other parish at this moment: 5 did not give reasons why, the 9 others advocated great distance to the next parish, a will to keep their parish open, a desire to protect one’s own identity, negative relationships with the neighboring parish, importance of keeping services in the parish due to its aging population, etc.
- d. 18 fabriques did not answer the question, whether they were not ready to do so, or whether they were afraid of placing their future at risk.

REFLECTION GROUP REMARKS

1. It is important that within each sector, administrators try to identify concrete challenges, threats and opportunities connected with their present situation and present these to the Bishop along with their suggestions for their future.
2. Parish administrators, whether for a parish or for the pastoral sector, should inform **the civil authorities concerned** about their situation, so as to keep an ongoing communication with the local population and the community as well, and in so doing keep a peaceful atmosphere in the area with respect with the values at hand.
3. It would be good for the diocesan Finance Director to keep in touch with his colleagues of other dioceses so as share analysis techniques (approaches) and successful experiences in the grouping or merging of parishes.

RECOMMENDATIONS: THE COMMITTEE RECOMMENDS :

17. That each fabrique determine those elements they consider threats and challenges for the survival of their christian community and formulate ways of facing those realistically in view of moving into the future.
18. That the following items be used as a guide to decide if time has come to initiate a reflection on the future of the community: regular deficits from year to year, net assets of the parish below 25 000\$, growing difficulty in maintaining quality pastoral services, difficulty to assume one’s share in maintaining diocesan pastoral services (episcopal tithe), sectoral pastoral services (priests’ salary and other personnel pay, other expenses), great difficulty in finding people to take up administration or other services, impossibility to pay for important repairs to buildings.
19. That if, following this exercise, the fabrique concludes that it cannot maintain the vitality of the parish, this information be delivered to the parishioners and that a thorough reflection process be carried with as many parishioners as possible in order to come to decisions about possible solutions.
20. That those fabriques and communities who wish to study together the possibility of merging with another parish discuss this question at the sector level and ask for the assistance of a diocesan staff member.

5. GENERAL COMMENTS BROUGHT OUT BY THE FABRIQUES

This reflection on the present situation of the christian communities in our diocese of Gaspé has elicited comments in a number of fabriques which are important to include in this report.

- “Answering the questionnaire has brought us to face the real situation of our community and has forced us to go in deeper in our reflection”.
- “We are very much worried about the future of our community”.
- “In smaller communities the bond of solidarity is generally much stronger and allows us to be together as a unified people”.
- “The most difficult is the financial issue. There is great need to arouse awareness in the parishioners for the important role they have in maintaining our heritage.”
- “The community has a strong desire to keep their church building, but a lived out faith remains a challenge. There is much social engagement, but little when it comes to transmitting the faith and building our community in its many expressions”.
- Our parish has been through important changes: closing of school, families moving out, coming of families that do not connect with the parish. We must take realistic decisions”.
- “For projects to take shape, we need to be optimistic and dare move on, be convinced and convincing, be creative too”.
- “Maintaining a fabrique active and offering services is still seen by the population as a given, involving next to no costs. Community members still have a very faint idea of the social impact in the long run of losing one’s church building”.
- “If we had the money, it would be highly necessary and appreciated to hire a pastoral agent”.

Reflection : urgency of doing something

That is why it seems to me that, in several communities, there is an immediate need to envision discernment and important changes, and this in a relatively short time (# 8). [“...] Supposing the few people in the place who could engage can no longer assure a minimal engagement, even when the parish is in good financial condition, that parish has become like an empty shell. Then, does it still have its “raison d’être” ? A parish will no longer be able to live on if it has nobody within the community to take responsibility in its pastoral life and its administrative matters as well, or again, if that parish cannot gather the money needed for its operations (# 11).

Mgr Jean Gagnon, Bishop of Gaspé, in pastoral letter *The urgency to act now for the future of our communities*, March 19 2013

A FEW GUIDELINES TO ENGAGE ON THE TURNING POINT

A broad reflection...

The findings and data gathered in the present report call for a serious analysis of the overall situation of our diocesan Church. This reflection must be carried out by all. Only an awareness arising from all the christian communities, and the civil forum as well, will enable us to make correct decisions and avoid serious mistakes. Such a large operation may not prevent tensions, but it will enable us to move forward in a spirit of transparency and responsibility.

... in all the regions of the Diocese

In order to reflect together on the findings of this report and carry our reflection further to the communities and pastoral sectors, the Bishop, along with the members of the Reflection Group and some people from the Diocesan services, will conduct in the fall of 2013 a series of meetings throughout the diocese. In each region, the meetings will be organized so as to involve a large number of participants, such as those who watch over and are involved in the administration of parish properties, people who are engaged in pastoral activities, and hopefully, a large number of the baptized who have a concrete interest in the life of our Church and our parish communities.

... to respond to the urgency of doing something now

Several items in the report show that the present situation in a good number of parishes causes concern and is in some places very precarious. Important challenges arise from this, indicating a need to find new paths in a future that is quite close to us, this, pastorally as Bishop Gagnon's spring letter (2013) has indicated, as well as administratively as the findings of the fabriques reveal in the present report. In order to get there, it will be important to remember the conditions that make a christian community possible : a **living faith**, a well organized **catechetical program** for children and parents, the gathering of the people in **prayer and the sacraments**, and the concrete living up of **charity**. Those values stand by far above the preservation of a church building that was built to meet the needs of a time past, even if those buildings still have a heritage value and are intimately connected with the local identity and history of our towns and villages.

... while keeping our hope alive

How will that be? The tasks at hand may seem gigantic, and the challenge just as big. On this 90th anniversary of the foundation of our diocese we must convince ourselves of the appropriateness still of our first Bishop, Mgr François-Xavier Ross' declaration : "Wishing to realize such tasks, we place our confidence in God who promised to be with his apostles till the end of ages". This conviction is shared by our present Bishop, Mgr Jean Gagnon, when he invites us to enter into this new page of the life of our diocesan Church " with an unflinching hope".

The Members of the Reflection Group