

Developing a New Weekend Mass Schedule

Throughout the process it is important to pray individually and communally for the guidance and wisdom of the Holy Spirit and to pray for the needs of all of the communities involved.

Should you have questions or need assistance at any point during the process, please contact the diocesan Office of Pastoral Resources and Planning.

Timeline: The process should start at least 4 months before the new schedule needs to go into effect. This allows 2-3 months to work through the decision process and 1-2 months to notify parishioners and the general public before the new Mass schedule begins.

1. The pastor(s)/pastoral administrator(s) determine which group will lead and coordinate the process. Will it be a planning team including the pastoral leader(s)? The pastoral council? The liturgy committee? There also needs to be a determination of who will make the actual decision and all stakeholders need to be clear who this is.
2. Identify upfront any and all constraints or parameters that will go into the decision (e.g., the number of priests available to preside at Masses, the number of Masses at which a priest is able to preside).
3. Identify what data needs to be collected (e.g., distances between churches, full year attendance patterns). Assign who is responsible for gathering this information and by when. If the schedule will include Masses at multiple churches, it is valuable to have someone measure the pews in each so that there can be consistency in the numbers used to reach decisions. Twenty-two inches per person is a good measure.
4. Schedule a meeting of the committee coordinating the process with the following objectives:
 - Review the data in #3 along with whatever else is known about each of the present Masses (e.g., demographics of the attendees, style of music and liturgy, impact on the Offertory).
 - Brainstorm, discuss and agree on principles and practical considerations that need to be met by the new Mass schedule. (Use the Principles and Practical Considerations List in Appendix I as a starting point.)

Note: Before the next meeting, members should each suggest one or two possible Mass schedules that meet the criteria and best serve the needs of all of the communities. Someone should be designated to compile these and send them out with the agenda.

5. Communicate the following to all parishioners through the bulletin, the parish website, pulpit announcements, and/or social media. This information should also be shared with parish staff:
 - Why Mass schedules need to change.
 - Which group is coordinating the process of determining the new Mass schedule (including names and contact information).
 - Who is making the actual decision.
 - All the gathered data.
 - The principles and practical considerations that will inform and guide decisions.
6. Schedule a follow-up meeting of the coordinating committee with the following objectives:
 - Discuss the proposed Mass schedules. Discard any that do not meet the constraints of #2.
 - Identify the advantages and disadvantages of each possible schedule.
 - Consolidate similar options.
 - Based on the principles/practical considerations, whittle the list down to 2 or 3 scenarios with specific times to present for feedback.
 - Decide how input will be solicited from parishioners at large, pastoral councils, and parish staff. Face to face meetings are strongly suggested.
7. Communicate the following to all parishioners through the bulletin, the parish website, and possibly a special mailing. The written information should also go to parish staff members. The repetition from an earlier communication is valuable along with new information:
 - Why Mass schedules need to change.
 - A brief description of the process used by the committee coordinating the process, including the number of Mass scenarios brainstormed and considered.
 - The principles and practical considerations that will inform and guide decisions.
 - Who is making the actual decision and when.
 - The two or three Mass schedules being proposed.
 - Time and location of any parishioner meetings and additional ways to give input.

8. Hold the meetings to solicit feedback. See the Sample Agenda for Parishioner Meetings in Appendix II.
9. In a meeting of the group coordinating the process of determining the new Mass schedule, review the feedback that has been received. Determine the new Mass schedule (unless the pastoral leader(s) are entrusted with the decision). If the decision is reserved to the pastoral leader(s), develop and share a recommendation.
10. Communicate the entire new Mass schedule and the date it goes into effect to all parishioners through the bulletin, a pulpit announcement, the website, and social media **beginning at least one month in advance**. Determine what additional groups need this communication (e.g. a local newspaper, local hotels, camping grounds, the DOR webmaster, parishioners who are snowbirds). It may be helpful to have signage outside the churches listing the new Mass times and the starting date. Continue the advertising for the entire month.
11. Beyond a communications strategy, there are several important practical details that need to be worked out:
 - Liturgical ministers, including sacristans, need to be contacted and asked how they want to be scheduled (the Mass times and worship sites). It may be necessary to determine who will unlock and lock doors.
 - Cantors, choirs, and musicians need to be similarly contacted. Sometimes musical groups will be combined; other times they may rotate leading the congregation in song.
 - Parishioners may need help in arranging transportation.
 - Include in the bulletin information about parking and rest rooms at each of the churches.
 - It may be helpful during the first 1-2 weekends of the new Mass schedule to have parishioners stationed at each church at the “old” Mass times to greet those who come and provide new Mass schedule times and locations.
 - Encourage parishioners to be especially welcoming to newcomers during the first month the new Mass schedule is in effect.
 - The week prior to the schedule going into effect, change permanent church signage listing Mass times.
 - On the first weekend of the new Mass schedule, have greeters at all doors and hold special coffee hours.
12. Commit to revisiting and evaluating the new Mass schedule after it has been in place for one full calendar year. This timeframe allows for parishioners to become comfortable with the changes and for the parish community(s) to experience the schedule over both summer and winter months.

Appendix I

Principles and Practical Considerations List

- Minimize the disruption to parishioners in their current Mass attendance patterns as much as possible given the challenge of fewer Masses.
- Pay attention to liturgical ministries, especially the existence of strong choirs or music groups. Where possible, choose vibrant music over weaker options.
- Allow the largest number of parishioners to attend Mass at more convenient, popular Mass times.
- If multiple worship sites are involved, allow sufficient time for the priest to travel between sites for Masses (including in winter weather).
- Allow sufficient time for the priest to prepare for Mass and to interact with parishioners afterward.
- Allow sufficient time for Sunday morning faith formation sessions to be held and for families to be able to participate in both Mass and religious education.
- Ensure sufficient room for parking (in some towns and villages the Mass time needs to be coordinated with that of neighboring Christian churches).
- Specify the earliest and latest possible Saturday evening and Sunday morning times based on the experience of the community(s).
- Pay attention to the potential impact on the Offertory. Anticipate that Mass attendance may decline – at least initially. Consider how that will affect the Offertory.
- Pay attention to the inability of some worship sites to reduce their number of Masses without severe overcrowding.

Appendix II

Sample Agenda for Parishioner Meetings

1. Opening prayer
2. Introduce members of the committee coordinating the process
3. Review the two to three possible Mass schedules
4. Ask if there are any questions
5. Ask questions of parishioners to gain the input the pastoral leader(s)/committee need to make a decision (e.g. What are the advantages/disadvantages of each proposed scenario? Can you come if each scenario is the one adopted? If not, which Mass and where will you go?)
6. Thank them for coming. Tell them when a decision will be made and by whom, when it will be communicated to them, and (if known) when the new Mass schedule will go into effect. Encourage them to adapt as needed in order to maintain the priority of the Eucharist in their lives.
7. Closing prayer

Note: It is very important that parishioners not “vote” although they may be asked for their preference. They need to understand that majority does not “win” – otherwise we unintentionally pit one church against another or those who regularly attend one Mass time against their fellow parishioners at the same parish or worship site who attend at a different time.