

**Real Presence/Real Future
Transition Team Update
September 2023**

In the June 2023 Transition Team Update, the Transition Team (“TT”) reported on what was known for certain as of June 2023. The TT reported that on May 25, 2023, Bishop Fernandes agreed with the findings of the Real Presence Real Future study recommending the closure of St. Mark and a merger with the parish of St. Mary of the Assumption at an undetermined point in the future.

The purpose of this update is to communicate how efforts to facilitate a merger have progressed. In addition, this update explains what the timeline for merger looks like at this point.

Efforts to Facilitate the Merger Have Been Successful

Since the June Update, the following decisions were made, and events occurred relating to the merger:

1. After 47 years of service as a Priest, Father Gideon retired as Pastor of St. Mark on July 11, 2023. Father Gideon was feted at a retirement party attended by approximately 300 people at Little Brook Meadows. During the party, the friends of Father Gideon presented him with the keys to a new Honda CRV. Since his retirement, Father Gideon has been moving his possessions into the Rectory of St. Bernard. He will complete his relocation to St. Bernard by October 1, 2023, and is looking forward to celebrating Mass at the parishes in the Perry County Consortium.
2. On July 11, 2023, Father Eilerman became Administrator of St. Mark Parish in addition to remaining the Rector of St. Mary of the Assumption Parish. Upon assuming his new role, Father Eilerman was impressed with the St. Mark buildings and grounds and expressed his desire that the property be retained, not sold, and used for Evangelization and Faith Formation.
3. Due to the retirement of Deborah Kaminski as Director of Religious Education at St. Mark, the PSR programs for St. Mark and St. Mary merged. PSR for both parishes is Sundays from 10 -11 am in classrooms at St. Mark beginning September 10, 2023. K of C Council #15447 plans to provide a “coffee and donuts mixer” for PSR parents at 10 AM.
4. RCIA, now known as OCIA, for both parishes have merged.
5. The Parish Pastoral Council of St. Mark and St. Mary have been merged with members of both parishes serving on the council.
6. Father Eilerman, Father Tomson of St. Bernadette, and the youth directors of St. Mary and St. Bernadette met in early September and decided to combine the Catholic youth programs of St. Mary, St. Mark, St. Joseph, and St. Bernadette. The meeting location for the combined youth program will be Rooms 7 and 8 at St. Mark beginning this autumn.
7. Two large celebrations have occurred since the June update providing opportunities for the parishioners of St. Mark and St. Mary to become better acquainted. The first was the Mass at St. Mary for the Feast of the Assumption of Mary on August 14, 2023, celebrating the installation of the basilica’s papal insignia by Bishop Fernandes. A reception followed the Mass. The second was the Combined Outdoor Mass and Parish Picnic for St. Mark and St. Mary held at St. Mark’s picnic shelter area on September 10, 2023. Both events were very well attended by members of both parishes.
8. Father Eilerman stated during the Town Hall meeting held on Palm Sunday that the outreach ministries of St. Mark needed to continue. As a result, the TT facilitated discussions between each of the outreach ministries of St. Mark and St. Mary.

Where possible, common outreach ministries will be merged. For example, the St. Mark Food Pantry ministry now has volunteers from St. Mary. In addition, members of the St. Mark and St. Mary Social Concerns Ministries have combined efforts with volunteers from both parishes working in these ministries.

Projected Merger Timeline

In the June Update, the TT noted that after the parish of St. Mark formally merges into the parish of St. Mary, there will only be one parish – the parish of St. Mary. However, the parish will have two campuses. The locus of faith formation and outreach ministry will occur primarily at the campus of St. Mark, and the locus of sacramental and worship activity will occur at the campus of St. Mary. In addition, the locus of primary education will continue to be at the St. Mary pre-school and grade school. The TT further noted the continued operation and maintenance of the St. Mark campus is dependent on the future financial support of the combined parish parishioners.

As of today, the TT has the following points to offer regarding the timeline for merger:

1. The TT developed a Holy Days of Obligation mass schedule for St. Mark and St. Mary through Easter of 2024. Details will be available in the near future.
2. Bishop Fernandes within the next couple weeks will be taking under advisement the Canonical Suppression of St. Mark Parish, as recommended by the Real Presence Real Future planning initiative. Under that plan St. Mark is to be merged into the parish of St. Mary, so that there is one parish, one church, and one school. Notice of the bishop's decision will be made public as soon as possible.

All of this involves difficult change. But the merger of the two parishes was necessitated by societal trends leading to a shortage of priests. Key to the effort of reversing this trend is the Bishop's Real Presence Real Future priority of evangelization. Following the merger of St. Mark and St. Mary, the campus of St. Mark will play a pivotal role in efforts aimed at evangelization. From enhanced outreach efforts to Bible studies and other catechetical programs to music events and concerts to social events and festivals to youth activities and recreational events to retreats and other activities, St. Mark will be a center of efforts to renew the Catholic community in Lancaster as well as reach out to those who do not know the Lord. Although St. Mark will cease to be a center of worship for the combined parish, it will have a vital role in the renewal and growth of the Church.

Given the change that is upon us, it is important to keep our eyes on the Lord and trust in His goodness and love. We must walk by faith down the road the Lord opens before us. That said, change is always difficult and sometimes triggers a cycle of grief that ranges from denial to anger bargaining to depression to acceptance and finally to the possibility of positive growth.