

An Update on Our Parishes' Pastoral Plan Process:

For nearly the past year, our parishes have joined with the rest of the Youngstown Diocese in an effort to create the Next Generation Diocese. This effort focuses on revitalizing parishes to better address our dwindling mass attendance, the trend toward an ever aging population, and the financial challenges every parish is facing.

During the past Lenten season, many of you participated in a Diocese wide survey creating a data driven picture of each parish. This database is called the Disciple Maker Index and it forms the foundation on which each parish can develop an optimal pastoral plan.

We had very good participation from both Our Lady of the Lakes and St. Mary and St. Joseph parishes. Almost all of the responses came from our regular weekend Mass attendees but it is these parishioners that will form the foundation on which our parishes will move forward. Understanding our parishioner's perspectives on the Church at large and their faith/beliefs reveals the strengths and opportunities we see in own parish.

Starting in September, approximately 20 representatives from both parishes met over the course of 8 meetings to review the Disciple Maker Index data. One of the first observations made by this team was how similar the two parishes were. The demographics for Our Lady of the Lakes and St. Mary and St. Joseph were almost identical. From age to finances to ethnicity to church participation, the parishioner characteristics were statistically identical. Though we remain separate parishes, the opportunities for collaboration were significant so it was logical that we would share a common vision.

A vision is a clear concise statement of where we want to go. Some call it a North Star referring to how sailors navigated through the seas using this fixed point in the sky to guide their path. Our parishes' vision would provide the reference against which all church activities would be tested to assure we were on the right path. Our vision was stated as follows.

**With love and joy,
We strive to be vibrant Catholic Parishes
Serving our Church and the larger communities
So that we may live in God's image**

Applying this vision to the Disciple Maker Index data base, the team looked for parish strengths and opportunities that were either contributing to or detracting from our ability to journey toward this target. By identifying our strengths, we found those resources which could be applied to our journey. Some of our parish strengths included a personal relationship with Jesus, the belief the Bible is the Word of God, and the importance of the church in supporting our faith journey.

Opportunities, which represent areas where we personally or the parish could grow in faith, fell into three categories. Though many responded they had a close personal relationship with Jesus, they also said they did not feel confident telling Jesus' story. Similarly, though many believed in the importance of the Church, they lacked an understanding of the church's tenets and direction. Very few parishioners felt comfortable telling someone Jesus' story or how they are personally impacted by their own relationship with God.

Referring back to the vision, the team recognized that the desire to be vibrant Catholic Parishes was the end goal. Vibrancy. could be defined as powerful Masses with meaningful homilies and engaging music, purposeful outreach to Catholics and non-Catholics alike, and family oriented evangelization that would bring the vitality of youth back to our congregations.

However, if we did not address our opportunities, our chances of achieving the desired vibrancy was minimal.

After much discussion, three priorities were identified as critical to our Pastoral Plan. They are listed here not in any order of importance.

Priority 1

Discover what Jesus means in our lives

We are in Jesus and Jesus is in us. He accepts us for who we are and challenges us to be the best version of ourselves. Jesus died out of love for us so that He could bring us into Union with the Trinity. If we are in love with Jesus, we are fully engaged in the Mass, the sacraments, and our Catholic faith. Our spiritual growth is an ongoing journey throughout our lives.

Addressing this priority will ensure a strong basis of faith, allow us to discover who Jesus is to grow our faith, and enable us to know and live the scriptures and God's commandments, this will enhance spirituality in our lives ultimately expanding the faith of believers.

Priority 2

Develop the skill and confidence to share Jesus' story and our own with others

Jesus spent three years teaching his disciples how to tell His story. As disciples, we too must be trained not only in how to tell the story but also how to recognize our audience's cues. We must develop the skills to share Jesus' story and our own with others.

Recognizing the opportunity to witness and being ready to share our story ultimately culminates in the invitation to join the faith community. Our own community's faith is strengthened through the confidence we have gained.

Priority 3

Enhance and strengthen our community of believers.

Jesus urges us to not only hear His words but to put them into action. Our parishes will grow and strengthen by each one of us reaching out to, and welcoming new and inactive members from the community. Special emphasis must be placed on those in our community under the age of 56. Fostering a familial environment will allow our parishioners to have deep and caring relationships with one another. It will also help us to grow in faith through active involvement in parish ministries, workshops, and other community events.

It is in addressing this priority that we see our Mass attendance increase and participation in Parish ministries and events grow.

Each priority will be tracked by a series of measurable goals. Performance targets will be established for these goals so success can be well defined. These targets will not be achieved overnight, but rather over several years. At this time, we are looking at a 3 year timespan in which to meet our goals.

Over the next few months, we will be publishing more details on each priority. Teams will be created at each parish to lead the planning and execution of strategies focused on each priority. For now, please prayerfully consider if any of these priorities excite you. Your voice and effort is essential to the success of this plan. If you would like to take a more active role, please let Father Dave know. Watch for future communications on this subject.