



RATIONALE

In every age the Church fulfills its great commission by responding to the spiritual hungers of God's people. In July of 2010, the Pope announced the creation of a new pontifical council for a *New Evangelization* and charged it with the task of re-vitalizing the faith of Catholics and equipping them to respond to the needs of a new generation.

This Diocese has experienced what could be the largest restructuring in the history of the American Catholic Church. While the restructuring program in this Diocese has formally concluded its aim is yet to be fully achieved. That is because the aim has always been the spiritual revitalization of parishes. Now is the time to take strategic steps forward on the path to parish vitality.

Whether or not a particular parish has directly experienced internal changes the religious landscape around all our parishes has shifted dramatically. Catholics are still grieving and leaving. New parishes are struggling to welcome newcomers and rebuild community. Some Catholic leaders have lost confidence as Catholics have drifted away. Some parishes, out of fear of instability, are resisting change at all cost, choosing instead to continue to do the same things, in the same way, and expecting different results.

There are many hurdles to parish vitality in the new religious landscape. Inactive Catholics in the United States constitute the second largest religious group in the country and make up the majority of those who attend evangelical churches. According to the National Study on Youth and Religion (2005), the Catholic Church is among the least successful at evangelizing its young people. These hurdles are significant, but not insurmountable for it is the Spirit that guides and empowers us.

Successful Catholic parishes are beginning to see the importance of working together in response to audiences in the new religious landscape. These audiences are attracted to a Church that is engaging and imaginative. They want to grow in faith through conversation and encounter. They expect access to spiritual content online. They desire worship and learning experiences that are inspiring and transformative - head, heart and hands. They want to contribute their talents in a significant way. They want to belong and to grow. In short, people today want to be affected by their participation in church. This is good news because responding to these demands can also transform and revitalize the parish.

OUR RESPONSE

Churches that are thriving, and not just surviving, are those that are moving parishioners from being merely involved to being fully engaged. These churches focus on mission over maintenance. This is an ambitious agenda for some parishes. And because there are no roadmaps into the future, this agenda will involve blazing new pathways. It may involve rethinking old assumptions. It may change the way a parish operates. But parishes willing to think strategically, and act boldly will find new partners in the work of the Gospel. No matter what lies ahead, these parishes will thrive. The Diocese of Buffalo will help parishes take the next steps forward on this path.

The Foundation for the Roman Catholic Diocese has chosen ***Pathways for Parish Vitality*** as the natural progression for parish innovations that began in either the *Adventures in Lifelong Faith Formation* or *Millennial Milestones projects*. ***Pathways for Parish Vitality*** provides the comprehensive framework to maximize the success of several programs and evangelization initiatives currently being conducted in parishes including Strong Catholic Families, Strong Catholic Youth. Still, there are no prerequisites for participating in the ***Pathways to Parish Vitality*** project. This initiative will be coordinated by the diocesan offices of Parish Life and Lifelong Faith Formation. Join us on a *pathway to parish vitality*.

This project will equip parishes to accomplish two key goals for parish re-vitalization - to foster parishioner engagement and build parish capacity for mission and outreach. This can be accomplished in some of the following ways:

Goal 1: Foster parishioner engagement:

- move parishioners from being merely involved to fully engaged
- targeted outreach in the new religious landscape (e.g. inactive Catholics, families or spiritual seekers)
- bridge the divides and create a culture of welcome through small faith communities

Goal 2: Build parish capacity:

- assess the functionality of existing parish organizations for engaging in mission
- adopt collaborative outreach strategies in a parish and parish cluster
- utilize digital technologies to enhance parish outreach and engagement efforts

How will your parish benefit? You will receive:

- tools and needed support to revitalize your parish
- a specialized resource team designed with your particular goals in mind
- clear baselines to use in creating a plan of action with benchmarks for measuring success
- tools to accomplish the goals of increasing parishioner engagement, building parish mission capacity, strategies for evangelization, methods for strategic thinking and organizational change
- ideas and resources from other innovative parishes
- access to supportive web 2.0 technologies
- access to local learning communities

What will your parish (or parish cluster) be expected to do?

- establish a leadership team for the project representing the key areas of parish life
- assess current efforts in parishioner engagement and parish capacity for mission and outreach
- develop a plan to accomplish the project goals – foster engagement and build parish capacity

- commit to this effort as a priority for the defined period of the project
- educate the entire parish about their role in engaging people in the Church's mission
- consider the structures, policies or procedures that will sustain positive innovations
- report progress based on benchmarks for success after eighteen months

Join us on a *pathway to parish vitality!* Learn how on March 16-17, 2011. Contact Dennis Mahaney, Office of Parish Life 847-5531 or Mary Beth Coates 847-5510 for more information about *Pathways to Parish Vitality*.

SAMPLE PARISH PROJECTS

These are intended to illustrate the possible next steps for your parish on the pathway to parish vitality. The illustrations include urban, suburban and rural parishes.

I. Holy Sabbath Parish (rural setting)

Just 3 years after the closing of their school, Holy Sabbath Parish, in a rural community, is still seeking to fill the void that seems to have been left behind. Membership continues to decline even after both the initial loss of the school and challenges related to the Journey of Faith and Grace. Recently attendance at the week-night religious education classes has dropped off, and even the participation in a few of the parish social events traditionally held on week nights has also fallen off. Some parishioners travel a long distance to attend Mass on Sunday and are unlikely to make the trip during the week or in the evening.

The pastor and staff are overworked and the congregation seems uninspired. Fortunately, the new parish catechetical leader has come along with new energy and ideas to save the day! After several discussions with the parish leaders, who are all volunteers, the pastor and catechetical leader decide to bring all parish programs to the Sunday calendar. With a focus on the “Sunday Eucharist as the source and summit” of parish life from which all else flows, the parish calendar is re-vamped so that times before and after Sunday Mass are used for catechesis, service, and fellowship. The parish implements a survey to identify the target audience and focus all parish programs for access and strategic impact.

In order to foster a re-establishment of the Sunday as a true Sabbath they do the following (with proposed budget):

- Parish survey on parish vitality (\$150 – postage/paper)
- Consult community calendar to avoid major school district conflicts, etc.
- Host a quarterly parish brunch (\$2000)
- Create a relationship with a service organization for a regular Sunday service event, provide transportation for 25 people 4 times (\$800)
- Create an interactive website, Facebook, webinars, etc for non-gathered learning across generations (\$1500 + 1000 for equipment)
- Help households continue conversations/topics started at Sunday mass at home and in small groups to reflect upon their role as evangelizers using Question of the Week format (\$200)
- Create a ‘feedback loop’ to allow households/families to share ideas from their discussions on the mission of their parish using social networking technologies (\$200)
- Inform the congregation at-large about the Eucharist and how it is a sacrament of mission
- Implement monthly spiritual renewal sessions for topics and groups based upon results of parish survey (\$1000)
- Provide training to parish leaders in order to create a leadership paradigm that fosters congregational participation and leadership in the absence of paid-staff and/or changes in pastor (\$1000)
- Resurvey, assess outcomes

Cost: \$6850

II. St. Teresa of the Streets and St. Vincent de Paul Parishes (urban setting)

St. Teresa and St. Vincent Parishes are linked city parishes that survived two rounds of diocesan consolidation on the East Side. The church buildings are majestic but aging. Most of the parishioners can recall belonging to two or three other parishes over the last ten or more years. Some drive in on Sunday from homes in the suburbs. The large empty buildings on the property serve as regular reminders of 'what once was'. At the same time the neighborhood is beginning to experience signs of resurgence. Young professionals are purchasing the larger elegant homes in the area and many immigrants and refugees are renting in the neighborhoods around these two churches which are less than three miles apart.

Occasionally a young Catholic might check out the church but there is little to sustain their interest. Immigrant newcomers start showing up to Mass despite the language barrier on Sunday but no one on staff is capable of communicating effectively with them. Parishioners give a smile but can offer little else. Attempts to discover the pastoral and sacramental needs of immigrants are slow and halting due to myriad linguistic and cultural differences. The pastor hopes that once the children learn English they can serve as translators between the parishes and the immigrant parents. It is also becoming evident that the families have many material needs about which the parishes can help. As the more English speaking immigrants come forward, the pastor starts involving them in (primarily non-verbal) leadership roles at Mass.

Upon entering the project the pastor elects a plan that utilizes the following strategies:

- Consult community leaders in each ethnic community about spiritual and pastoral needs of their population and conduct a congregation vitality survey
- Create a relationship of trust with families from each ethnic community
- Arrange for visits of bi-lingual priests from the largest ethnic communities for celebrating sacraments of initiation (\$1800 travel and stipend)
- Equip community leaders from ethnic communities to gather as small groups/families in homes to consider the challenges of life in this country in light of their faith (\$1800 for training, published materials and translation work)
- Gather and train young leaders from each community to build a inter-ethnic youth community (\$2700 for leadership training program, event materials, community building events and a retreat)
- Establish an inter-ethnic task force from both parishes for re-imagining a multi-ethnic Catholic parish, and evaluate the capacity of various ministries to welcome newcomers
- Inform the congregation at-large about the evangelizing purpose of the Catholic parish and invite them to participate in a Lenten process of community suppers, and small groups to consider the realities of the neighborhood and the mission of the parish as ambassadors of Good News (\$1200)
- Provide stipends to coordinators in the absence of multi-lingual staff (\$10,000)
- Resurvey and assess progress toward benchmarks

Cost: \$16,500

III. St. Suburban Parish (suburban setting)

This parish is busy. It is sustained by a core of parishioners who run a great many events but who share a feeling that the parish is still losing ground. There is a parish school but school families demonstrate little interest in parish life. Collections are stagnant despite a recent stewardship campaign. The congregation is aging and leaders are tiring. Young families seem to attend intermittently at best and a quick survey of envelop usage confirms that young families do not seem to stay for very long. This concerns the pastor deeply.

After staff level meetings and consultation with the pastoral council, the pastor decides to ask all parish leaders to review programs and activities in light of their impact on young families. The pastor wants all interested leaders to become more responsive and engaging to young families. This is the starting point for St. Suburban Parish to revitalize the congregation by responding to young families as they enter the New Pathways project. During the first planning sessions the team creates the following plan for greater parish “response-ability”:

1. Survey the Parish - in general and local young families in particular through the school and related friendship associations (\$80 for printing and postage)
2. Staff Vitality Retreat - to motivate, equip staff and foster ownership for this change process (\$900 overnight stay in facility, materials, speaker)
3. Train Leaders of Organizations and Ministries (e.g. pastoral council, finance council, faith formation, liturgy, bereavement, marriage preparation, youth, social concerns) - about evangelization and how the parish can be more responsive in a three session mini-course (\$400 for speaker stipends and refreshments).
4. Pastoral Planning - Each parish ministry or organization agrees to focus on strategies that will respond to younger adults and young families (\$180 for materials and general expenses).
5. Program Implementation and Outcome Evaluations - Each parish ministry evaluates their current activities in light of the spiritual needs of less engaged audiences. They re-envision existing events, programs and activities as a points-of-contact for evangelization with younger Catholics (cf. Responsive Evangelization). The evaluation generates strategic recommendations for new activities, additional leadership formation, new organizational priorities and cooperative possibilities both within the parish and with neighboring churches (\$6100 for professional “Back to Church” campaign, “Strong Catholic Families – Strong Catholic Youth” speaker stipends, materials, child-care expenses and refreshment costs).
6. Spiritual Renewal - The parish initiates seasonal retreats for the congregation to focus the congregation on its evangelizing purpose. Opportunities for practical spirituality, outreach and justice are encouraged. Parishioners are invited to participate in small faith sharing groups for Advent and Easter where opportunities to become more engaged in parish life are offered. These groups are scheduled conveniently and open to friends and visitors, and some specifically to younger adults and young families (\$800 for materials and facilitator training).
7. Structural Reorganization – As the plan is implemented, the pastor, staff and pastoral council leaders meet to consider the structural implications of what is being implemented. Parish leaders identify where innovations have the greatest potential for impact. Leaders meet with focus groups and make appropriate recommendations to the parish regarding changes in parish policy, practice and structure. After appropriate consultation the pastor decides on which administrative, operational and cultural shifts to make in parish life.
8. Evaluation - Parish staff creates an evaluation group populated by representatives from all parish ministries (\$340 staff planning retreat).
9. Resurvey the Parish and Young Families – Results are shared and responses evaluated.

Cost: \$9800

PROJECT TIMELINE

Phase 1 – Invitation and Preparation (October 2010 – May 2011)

Advisory Group (November 2010)

Form and educate an advisory group of business and ministry professionals to advise the project
Establish focus groups drawn from key stakeholders and constituencies.

Publicity and Informational Meetings (December 2011 – February 2011)

Hold meetings in each vicariate to introduce the project and educate parish leaders about a responsive approach to evangelization which can revitalize the parish.

Preparatory Conference (March 16-17, 2011)

All parishes are invited to participate in a two-day preparatory conference. Those who attend will leave with a view on the new religious landscape, an understanding of the dynamics of parish engagement, an overview the *New Pathways* process, the tools to assess parish engagement and building parish capacity for mission and outreach. Conference session will be taped

Exploratory Consultation (March – May 2011)

The diocesan offices of Parish Life and Lifelong Faith Formation will receive inquiries and questions from interested parishes. Each parish will be invited to create a baseline for parish vitality using survey tools. Interested parishes can receive support in discerning their top priorities.

Phase 2 – Proposal Development and Award Selection (May - October 2011)

Not all parishes will need or be awarded funding. Projects will be funded based on the published project goals.

Planning Conference (May 6-7, 2011)

Parishes that choose to continue in the project will attend. The content of the planning conference will include a strategic process for pastoral planning, answers to issues arising from a mission-centered parish life and steps in grant proposal writing.

Establish Benchmarks (June 10, 2011)

Parishes will assess their capacity for mission and outreach and create appropriate benchmarks accordingly. Focus groups will assist parishes in interpreting survey findings. Parishes will receive consultation support in writing grant proposals for their project. Each project will have clearly stated goals with measurable outcomes that impact key areas of parish life with defined benchmarks.

Grant Application Deadline (September 10, 2011)

The diocesan offices of Parish Life and Lifelong Faith Formation will advise the Foundation regarding funding for parish proposals. Announcements will be made later by the Foundation.

Grant Award Announcement (November 5, 2011)

Phase 3 – Project Implementation (October 2011 – April 2012)

Develop Supportive Web 2.0 Technologies (September 2011)

Use social network and video-streaming technologies to chronicle and share progress as the project unfolds in participating parishes.

Conference Day (January 2012)

Two more conference days will be address the process of strategic planning, facilitating change, assessing progress and sustaining innovation.

On-site Consultation (January & March 2012)

A team coordinated by the Office of Parish Life and Life-long Faith Formation will visit twice yearly with participating parishes to support progress and test innovations. Additional support is provided on an as needed basis. Advisory group members will be welcome to join in these consultations.

Phase 4 – Project Evaluation (March - June 2012)

On-site Evaluation (March 2012)

Participating parishes will repeat initial assessment of parish vitality and capacity for evangelization. The analysis of progress toward benchmarks will be provided to the parish team who will meet with a visitation team comprised of members of the advisory group will evaluate project impact and implications for parish vitality.

Conference Day (March 2012)

Participating parishes will examine project implications, learn about how to make desirable change sustainable, develop a plan for future innovation.

Share Results (September 2012)

Participating parishes submit reports of performance and learning to the Diocese. All parishes will be welcome to attend a showcase event that will highlight parish best practices and plan for future progress. Results will be published with implications and best practices at the diocesan website and Facebook site. Innovations will be shared with all interested parishes via e-journal articles and submitted for consideration for a national publication.