

St. Matthew Catholic Church

Pastoral Plan History



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History

Introduction

St. Matthew Catholic Church was officially established on the feast of St. Matthew, Patron Saint of banking, September 21, 1986. Under the guidance of Monsignor Joseph Kerin, 200 Catholics celebrated Mass on November 2 to officially launch what is now the largest Catholic parish in the Southeast. Those 200 members have now become 7,000 families. The parish that originally celebrated Mass in a movie theater and then built a gymnasium now utilizes a 36,000 square foot sanctuary, along with a 62,500 square foot education building, and a 27,000 square foot ministry building.

As the parish has grown in membership and physical size, so has the faith and outreach of St. Matthew. A myriad of ministries have been established to meet the spiritual, personal, and communal needs of the parish.

St. Matthew Catholic Church has a reputation as a vibrant faith community with a “can do” attitude. Despite its size, it is a warm, friendly place for parishioners of all ages. It is a place of reverent celebration of the Eucharist and one in which we can live our Catholic faith with like-minded individuals.

Pastoral Plan History Summary

In order to minister to the spiritual needs of the parish, a Pastoral Plan was developed. The first St. Matthew Pastoral Plan was signed by Monsignor McSweeney and implemented in March 2001. This plan was formulated with input from clergy, staff, and ministry leaders under the guidance of the Pastoral Council. It established six Pastoral Committees: Worship, Word, Service, Community, Evangelization, and Stewardship.

The ministries of the parish were placed under the appropriate committee. Each Pastoral Committee was led by a volunteer convener and a liaison from the Pastoral Council was assigned to provide help and guidance. Each Committee formulated yearly goals and objectives for itself and assisted in goal setting and objectives for each of its ministries. The goals and objectives were to be aligned with the liturgical and spiritual needs of the parish. Goal achievement was to be measured each year and reported to the Pastor and the Pastoral Council.

Pastoral Plan History Summary CONTINUED

The Plan has been updated on two occasions in 2003 and in 2005. Before each revision, the plans were critically reviewed and changes were made. A change in the 2003-2006 Pastoral Plan made goal setting more specific and measurable. A change in the 2005-2008 Pastoral Plan focused on the U.S. Catholic Bishops Letter, “Go and Make Disciples” and our “baptismal call to evangelize” (Pastoral Plan 2005-2008, p. 5). Each convener was instructed to include at least one evangelization based goal and objectives into this plan.

In this plan, the unique nature of the Evangelization and Stewardship Committees was recognized. These Committees do not have specific ministries, per say, associated with them. They “were intricately threaded throughout each ministry and touch each parishioner within the St. Matthew Faith Community” (2005-2008, p. 6).

“The Pastoral Plan was created to become our personal covenant with God. It was a framework by which we could consummate a heartfelt commitment to Jesus Christ and deepen our relationship with God and to each other within the St. Matthew Community” (2005-2008, p. 4).

Pastoral Plan Assessment 2001 – Present

The St. Matthew Pastoral Plan has been reviewed and updated on three different occasions and improvements made with each. With the growth of the parish, administering to the thousands of families and multitude of ministries listed under various Committees has become increasingly difficult.

Problems noted in each of the three plans include but were not limited to:

- Insufficient time for conveners to effectively keep track of all ministries under their Committee,
- Difficulty coordinating communication among and between Pastoral Committees,
- Difficulty coordinating communication among and between ministries,
- Difficulty providing adequate ministry leader training,
- Difficulty adequately placing new volunteers into ministries that met their talents,
- Difficulty coordinating goals across committees that meet the needs of the parish,
- Difficulty adequately and appropriately setting goals and objectives and implementing a measurement process,
- Difficulty coordinating activities with St. Matthew staff, and
- Implementing a convener succession plan that worked.

Pastoral Plan Assessment 2001 – Present CONTINUED

These problems were first identified in the second plan revision (2003-2006) and it was then suggested by the revision committee that eventually there would be a need for all committees to be run by paid staff with volunteer assistance from parishioners. Convener “burnout”, poor communication, and lack of time for the size of the job were noted as the reasons for the difficulties that the conveners were having in managing their committees.

Measuring the success of the Pastoral Plan was more problematic. Each year, the goals and objectives of each of the committees were reviewed. The relative success of meeting the goals for the proceeding year was recorded and reported to Monsignor McSweeney and the Pastoral Council. In some cases, goals for the next year were modified in response to previous year’s failures. However, there was little objective evidence that the Pastoral Plans were effectively consummating “a heartfelt commitment to Jesus Christ and deepening our relationship to God and to each other within the St. Matthew Parish Community” (2005-2008, p. 4). In other words, were we really increasing the spiritual commitment or engagement of the parishioners of St. Matthew Catholic Church?

Parish Life Survey 2006

Recognizing the difficulty in obtaining objective measurements as to the “health” of the parish, Monsignor McSweeney commissioned the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate from Georgetown University to perform a survey of the Parish. Better known as the CARA study, this was compared to a similar study done in 1999. The study measured all facets of parish life: sense of community, worship, evangelization, spiritual formation, stewardship, parish priorities, communication, and leadership.

There were 3,596 respondents. Results were compared to the study from 1999. From this survey, strengths and weaknesses of the parish were identified.

Pertinent improvements in parish life from 1999 were noted in the following areas:

- Overall parishioner satisfaction with the parish,
- Commitment to social justice and religious education,
- Outreach to teens,
- Liturgies,
- Spiritual formation,
- Pastor leadership, and
- Pastoral Council.

Parish Life Survey 2006 CONTINUED

Pertinent problem areas identified included:

- Outreach to inactive Catholics, young adults, new parishioners, and single parents,
- Parish efforts to help the practice of gospel values in daily life,
- Communication,
- Parishioner role in decision-making,
- Adult religious education, and
- Utilization of the sacrament of reconciliation.

Additional analysis of the CARA revealed some interesting findings regarding spiritual commitment and parish engagement. In the summary of findings in the CARA report (p. 75-81), specific mention was made regarding those parishioners involved in “more than one parish ministry or activity”. Members that were more engaged at St. Matthew (i.e.: involved in more than one parish ministry) were more likely to report higher satisfaction than non-engaged members with regards to:

- Overall parish satisfaction,
- Quality of preaching,
- Sense of community,
- Parish community is important to them,
- Inclusion in parish life,
- Quality of masses,
- Mass importance in their life and need for communion/Eucharist,
- Quality of homilies,
- Parish helps them develop their spiritual life,
- Parish meets their spiritual needs,
- Those that consider themselves practicing Catholics,
- Importance of faith sharing,
- Importance of stewardship,
- Satisfaction with spending priorities,
- Promotion of responsible stewardship,
- Do not use “too busy” to cite why they do not volunteer,

Parish Life Survey 2006 CONTINUED

- Parish leader vision,
- They need to develop a parish sense of community, and
- How well informed they are.

In summary, the CARA report did demonstrate overall improvements in parish life from 1999 to 2006. This would suggest that, at least in some part, the Pastoral Plans were helping to develop a “commitment to Jesus Christ and deepening our relationship with God and to each other within the St. Matthew Parish Community”. This effect, however, seemed to be most profound on those already actively engaged in the parish and was not as prevalent in those less engaged or not engaged. At St. Matthew, only 49 percent of respondents attended Mass every week and 55 percent of respondents reported no involvement in any parish ministry or activity. The actual percentages are likely worse because the sample size only reflected those likely to fill out the survey and, therefore, represented only a portion of registered parishioners.

Pastoral Plan 2008 – 2011 Committee

In the summer of 2007, Monsignor McSweeney commissioned a separate committee to review the present state of health of St. Matthew. The purpose of this Pastoral Plan Committee was to reassess in a top to bottom review the functioning of the parish and how well it is meeting the goals as outlined by our mission statement. This committee was to review and make recommendations across any and all areas regarding the functioning of St. Matthew ultimately culminating in the adoption of a new Pastoral Plan. This committee was encouraged to think “revolutionary” in order to take St. Matthew “to the next level” in terms of administering to the parishioners as well as to the greater Charlotte community, and to increase spiritual commitment.

The committee chosen represented a cross section of parish leaders. Members from the clergy, present and past Pastoral Council, Finance Council, and parish staff accepted the invitation for the review.

Initial meetings were held with parish staff managers and Sister Jeanne Marie Kienast. Pastoral Council meetings were attended and input solicited. An extensive review of the CARA study was performed. There was distribution and scoring of a Parish Vitality Survey to the committee, key parish staff and clergy members. An extensive SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis was performed by the committee and also by the staff managers. The results were reviewed and discussed with the committee as well as with the staff.

Initial review and discussion led to the conclusion that there were four areas of opportunity for betterment of the parish: spiritual development, communication, welcoming, and leadership development.

Pastoral Plan 2008 – 2011 Committee CONTINUED

Additional areas that needed review included the structure and role of the Pastoral committees, the role of Pastoral Council, the future of Emmaus groups, Pastoral care and counseling, facilities, ecumenism, vocations, and future expansion.

Spiritual Development

The general perception of clergy, staff members, and the Pastoral Committee was that, like many Catholic parishes in the United States, there were a significant number of parishioners that were not actively involved in their faith and in their church. They are “part-time participants”. They represent the majority, not minority, of the parish. The committee felt this was an area where a tremendous positive impact could be made by developing processes to engage those non-engaged parishioners and enhance spiritual development opportunities currently available for those already engaged.

Communication

Based on detailed interviews, it was concluded that communication efforts at the staff level, convener level, ministry level, and to the parish as a whole, were poor. There were questions regarding the ability of the parish to utilize appropriate technology to reach the large number of parishioners and the most effective means to do this. There was universal disappointment in the web site. By improving these areas, great improvements in parish communication across the board would be expected.

Leadership Development

The committee believed that the large number of ministries and leaders/volunteers provided a unique opportunity for enhanced leadership development. By implementing a plan stressing spiritual development and leadership training for all ministry leaders, it is believed that these “point people” could become facilitators of spiritual growth and parish engagement for the entire parish.

Welcoming

With the explosive growth of the parish, the importance of trying to keep St. Matthew as a place where all, especially new parishioners, feel welcome was of paramount importance. Unique opportunities exist to significantly enhance the welcoming of all new parishioners. Additionally, by pursuing aggressive follow-up contact, this will maximize successful long-term engagement of new parishioners and enhance spirituality.

The Prime Directive

The initial findings listed above were presented to Monsignor McSweeney and to the staff. With Monsignor taking the lead, all agreed that St. Matthew Parish needed to focus, first and foremost, on significantly raising the overall level of spirituality and engagement of all parishioners. This would be the prime directive. All other areas of opportunity would be addressed within the context of improving the spirituality and engagement of the parish.

Researching the Prime Directive

The Pastoral Planning Committee commenced extensive research. The goal was to identify other Catholic parishes that instituted effective spiritual development programs. Publications were reviewed, interviews held, and web searches were made. Parishes that appeared to be welcoming and spiritual were contacted for information and advice.

Two Catholic parishes, Immaculate Heart of Mary in Cincinnati and St. Gerard Majella in Long Island were two of the first Catholic parishes in the United States that utilized a unique program of parish engagement from the Gallup organization. These parishes were highly enthusiastic regarding the program in terms of its effectiveness, functionality, and ability to objectively measure outcomes in spiritual commitment and parish engagement.

The Gallup organization was contracted and additional research led to the purchasing of two books: Growing an Engaged Church: How to Stop “Doing Church” and Start Being the Church Again and Living Your Strengths: Discovering Your God-Given Talents and Inspiring Your Community. The first of these books, Growing an Engaged Church, discussed the root causes of poor spirituality and poor parish engagement. Objective research was performed involving thousands of Christians across many denominations. A comprehensive questionnaire was developed to measure the spiritual commitment and engagement of parishioners. This objective measure, the Member Engagement Survey 25 (ME²⁵), was used as a baseline measurement. Each year, a repeat ME²⁵ measurement is performed to see if the parish was making progress in its spiritual commitment and parish engagement.

The Living Your Strengths program will help an individual discover his/her unique God given talents. These are used for individual growth and discernment and, in many cases, lead to spiritual development and assists in ministry placement based upon the person's strengths.

Researching the Prime Directive CONTINUED

Key points from Gallup include:

1. The two primary indicators of spiritual health are:
 - a. Spiritual commitment
 - b. Congregational engagement (Winseman, p. 44)
2. Contrary to what one would expect, spiritual commitment does not necessarily lead to parishioner engagement. The key points are:
 - a. Engaged belonging is more likely to lead to enhanced believing. The extent to which members feel engaged in their faith communities has a profound effect on their personal spiritual commitment.
 - b. Individuals who are highly engaged in their parish also tend to have high levels of personal spiritual commitment.
 - c. Parish leaders who focus their efforts on increasing a member's sense of belonging end up, not only increasing the member's engagement but also increasing their spiritual commitment.
 - d. Just being active in your church does not mean that you will be engaged. Engagement should match the individual's strengths.
 - i. Those "not engaged" in their church often are completely satisfied with their church, and they are not negative. However, they feel no significant emotional bond to their parish and thus do not center their life around their parish and have been shown to:
 1. Give less in contributions
 2. Volunteer less for ministries
 3. Be less inviting
 4. Be less spiritually committed
 - ii. Successful engagement depends upon many factors but the most important appear to be:
 1. A "rich soil" onto which the seed will fall. Such as:
 - a. Welcoming
 - b. Sustained, meaningful engagement
 - c. Small groups
 - d. A clear mission statement and clear expectations of membership to that parish.
 2. Parishioners discovering their unique talents that are given to them by God.

Researching the Prime Directive CONTINUED

3. “The key characteristic for the engaged member is they organize their life around their Church” (Winseman, p. 67).

This statement is clearly in line with the stated goals of Monsignor McSweeney to make St. Matthew a Catholic spiritual oasis for all parishioners.

From this research, it was believed that spiritual development would be enhanced significantly if there were a strong emphasis on parishioner engagement. The engagement must occur in a rich and fertile soil of spiritually committed and engaged individuals. Engagement should focus on an individual’s God given talents as a human being and be guided by the Holy Spirit. With these factors in mind, the Pastoral Plan has been revised and presented herein.

Resources

Pastoral Plan, 2003 – 2006

Pastoral Plan 2005 – 2008

Winseman, Al. Growing An Engaged Church: How to Stop “Doing Church” and Start Being the Church Again. New York: Gallup Press, 2006.

Winsemen, Al., et al. Living Your Strengths: Discovering Your God-Given Talents and Inspire Your Community. New York: Gallup Press, 2003-2004.