

The Joe! Study Responses to the 2nd Series of Focus Groups

A second series of Focus Groups was held this summer to further explore the responses provided in the Joe! Study, which was conducted in October 2009. The subject of this series of Focus Groups was “Our expectations of the parish.” The comments provided were constructive and helpful. There were 11 Focus Group sessions held and 103 parishioners participated, with slightly more women than men. Roughly three-quarters of those who attended have been members of St. Joseph Parish for more than 10 years and are 50 years old or older.

The questions asked were:

- How does our parish display a commitment to the spiritual growth of the parishioners?
- As we look to the future, what would you like to see in an ideal parish?
- What are the top three priorities or concerns our parish is currently facing?
- What are the obstacles to addressing these issues?

These responses will serve as part of the foundation for a parish-wide mini-study to be conducted in November, 2010. The responses to the questions have been compiled and categorized by themes.

Faith-Centered Activities

A significant majority of the responses centered on the need to focus on youth, teens, young adults and young families. Participants liked the current variety of spiritual growth opportunities but they were concerned that these programs seem to be primarily oriented to older adults. Many suggestions were made, including: Sunday evening Mass for youth and young adults with music and homilies that meet their needs, a Christ Renews His Parish experience for teens, speakers, programs and resources that address the challenges young families face in today’s world, social activities, community service projects and the need to utilize technology as a tool to reach younger parishioners. Many stated that St. Joseph offers a wide range of opportunities for spiritual growth and the community has grown spiritually over the past five years. Suggestions were made to consider for future programs: provide faith formation on the fundamentals of our Catholic faith, provide a range of programs that meet people where they are spiritually and their specific stage of life, and create small faith groups. A few participants felt information needed to be provided on a variety of social issues (abortion, immigration and the sex abuse scandal).

Many respondents addressed the components of the Liturgy. Currently, the music during Mass, the homilies and the number of Masses allow for spiritual growth. Positive feedback was also provided on the practice of publishing the next week’s readings, the amount of time and energy spent planning for the liturgies, the explanation provided for the readings and providing a family mass. Looking to the future, many noted a desire to have a variety of liturgy styles available (traditional, contemporary, Sunday evening, Latin and family), passionate homilies with a single message, increased parishioner involvement in the liturgies. A few expressed a desire to have Family Mass celebrated in the church. There were opposing views on having witness speakers. Some felt attendance at mass should be encouraged and that an increased reverence for the Eucharist and Blessed Mother is needed. Several expressed appreciation for the daily rosary and holy hour but they noted a desire for Eucharistic Adoration and more devotional opportunities.

Finally, some mentioned the Religious Education Program, including its family Faith Weaving component, and the school were facilitating spiritual growth. Some noted it was important to continue to build up the Religious Education Program and to link more closely the school and Religious Education Program.

Strategic & Succession Planning (Management)

In this theme, priest concerns were a dominating topic; the retirements and replacement of the priests, and a possible reduction in the number of priests were identified as specific issues. Many people identified the need for strong leadership involving parishioners and staff. The suggestions included accountability of the Parish Pastoral Council and staff, and a perceived lack of follow-through within the various ministries. A few noted the need for improved staff relations. In planning for the future, some suggested creating a parishioner/staff transition team. A willingness

to learn from other churches was expressed by many as a priority. Some people saw a need for a more transparent, long-term plan, which could include a census, an organizational review, and a communication and marketing plan.

Welcoming and Inviting

Many noted the parish has made great strides in reaching out to all parishioners. A few identified “Growing the Engaged Church” (the Joe! Study and Focus Groups) process as one that has helped create an inviting environment. However, a majority of the respondents shared that there continues to be room for growth. The suggestions included increased social events, more greeters, more productions (plays, performances and concerts) and more Nametag Sundays and Java with Joe.

Many identified the need to reach out to those in the community who are in need including those with a disability, the elderly or single parents. Some expressed that sensitivity to the demands placed on young families needs to be better demonstrated. A few people stated the parish should conduct a census to understand who we are as a community (ethnicity, marital status, etc.) and that the parish should display an increased tolerance for diversity.

Community

A majority of the responses stated the parish provides a great variety of opportunities for parishioners to become involved. They cited social events, service-centered activities and adult faith formation programs. A few commented more service-centered opportunities are required to address the increased need (food, provisions for financial needs, door-to-door outreach and counseling) and increased communication on social justice issues. The Carpenter and website were noted as useful means of communication however many suggested the use of technology to improve the effectiveness and as a tool to attract young people. A quarterly or monthly calendar with all parish events listed was recommended. A chapel for small religious events, a parish library and facilities for youth activities were also suggested. A few wanted the return of the ministry fair. Some respondents would like parish activities to be more enjoyable and fun.

Concerns and Obstacles

The bulk of these comments focused on issues that may have an impact as the parish plans for the future. Financial concerns involving parishioner contributions, the amount of paid staff, declining revenue from the commercial properties, the maintenance of the school and facilities were all identified as factors in this area. Many people mentioned as obstacles outside influences such as a low priority for one’s faith, consumerism, the secularism of society and peoples’ busy schedules. Staff and leadership issues were noted as a contributing factor such as the perceived rigidity of some staff members, lack of follow-through, bureaucracy, the size of staff, and the prospect of fewer priests. Lack of expectations, identified priorities and future plans were all identified as concerns as well as the need to continually strive for a welcoming and inviting environment. Several participants expressed concern over the quality of the homilies, the length of mass and the desire for Sunday evening Mass. Some commented that the lack of a framework for parishioner input was an obstacle. Also identified was the perceived minimal understanding or excitement parishioners have regarding their Catholic faith. Other people stated their concern that parishioners’ needs are being met by other Catholic and Christian churches. The low priority toward youth and young adults, the fear of change, and the size of the parish were all identified as challenges.

Once again, the responses will serve as the foundation for a parish-wide mini-study to be conducted in November, 2010; parishioners will be asked to rank a range of choices related to expectations of themselves and of their parish. After that, the results of this parishioner mini-study will set the foundations for structuring our Parish Covenant and The Saint Joseph Parish Strategic Plan.

As always, we remain grateful for your participation and prayers!

“...I have left an open door before you...” Revelations 3:8