

WALKING TOGETHER DETAILED REPORT

OVERVIEW

The *Walking Together: A Journey to Invigorate the Our Parish* initiative sprang from Parish Council discussions in early 2022 about the need for a five-year plan for the parish. This discussion coincided with the world-wide *Synod on Synodality* called by Pope Francis, which engaged the world-wide Church in a listening process to better understand the nature and future of the Catholic Church. Finally, the theme of the Little Black Book for Lent was *Walking with Jesus*. As a Parish Council, we decided to enter our own “synodal” process, using the *Walking Together* theme, to provide an opportunity to listen to our parishioners, synthesize their feedback and use that information as we plan for the future of our parish.

The first step in the Walking Together initiative was to conduct a Parish Census. After Masses each weekend in June 2022 census forms were made available for parishioners to fill out. Forms were also available in the church and were included in a mailing and made available on the parish website. Over 230 forms have been received, which included a number of new parishioners. One very positive outcome of the census was the collection of email addresses, which are now being used to provide regular email communication with parishioners via *Flock Notes*.

Twelve sharing sessions for adults were held between July 21, 2022, and September 24, 2022. Sixty parishioners attended a session. Two sharing sessions (September 18, 2022, and October 2, 2022) were held for young people (grades 7-9) in conjunction with their Faith Formation and Confirmation classes. Fourteen young people attended. The coordinator of Confirmation did reach out to those confirmed over the past few years and extended an invitation to them to attend, however none did.

Despite numerous efforts to encourage attendance by younger parishioners, especially those with children (including attempts by the Faith Formation coordinators to encourage parents of students in the program), most attendees were older parishioners.

In an effort to reach out to those who do not regularly attend Mass (for whatever reason, including Covid concerns and our homebound/elderly), a mailing was sent in August 2022 that included a copy of the questions used at the sharing sessions, and asking for it to be completed and returned. We also posted the questions on the parish website. Through these communications, we have received seventeen responses.

In total, we received input from 77 adult parishioners and 14 youth.

Sharing sessions were led by a facilitator and a scribe. Participants were assured that all comments shared would be kept confidential, as would the names of those who participated. This process was not about “who said what”, but about honest sharing by participants, who were asked to keep all conversations confidential. To protect confidentiality, we did not keep a list of those attending. The scribes did not record participants’ names, only their comments.

The sessions began with a prayer to the Holy Spirit, followed by a short overview of how the Walking Together initiative came to be. The facilitator then led the group through discussion of the following questions:

- Share what, in your opinion, is good/positive about our parish.
- Share what about our parish is a concern for you.
- Share your dreams/visions for our parish.
- Do you have one thought or message that you would like the parish to hear?

After the sharing, the facilitator reminded the group of the importance of confidentiality. The group was also told that the input would be compiled and shared with the Parish Council and the parish at-large. The sessions closed with the Walking Together prayer.

Input shared at each session was recorded by the scribe. These notes are kept together in one binder, along with the responses that were mailed in, as well as a written response that was given to the team by a participant. Members of the team took on the task of compiling and categorizing the input. The notes from each session, as well as the synthesis of the comments, are available to be viewed by interested parishioners (contact the Parish Office).

The Walking Together team placed comments in one of four categories: Good/Positive, Concerns, Visions/Dreams and Specific Ideas. The lists were provided to the Parish Council at their October 11, 2022, meeting. There was considerable overlap in responses, and some comments could have been entered in numerous categories. There were also a number of categories (such as financial concerns) that came up in almost every adult session and generated wide-ranging conversation.

A summary report of the major themes voiced during the sharing sessions was shared with the parish on the weekend of December 3 & 4, 2022. An insert of the report was placed in the bulletin and is still available on the parish website.

The sections that follow expand on the themes presented in December. Each section contains a summary of the major points that emerged from the sharing sessions followed by a brief commentary.

ATTENDANCE, WELCOMING, ATTRACTING OTHERS

- Friendly, welcoming people
- Concern for each other and our heritage
- Greeters are important for new parishioners and visitors as well as regular attendees
- Lack of welcoming makes it difficult for new parishioners
- Many parishioners have been here for generations
- Low attendance, even at Christmas and Easter
- Mass attendance is sparse
- Parishioners are leaving with some being seen attending other churches, both Catholic in other towns or those of other denominations

Welcoming begins at the front door. It is extremely important to leave the church doors open during the day. Per our participants, all should be greeted, welcomed, and made to feel that

they are an important part of the parish community. Newer members of the parish expressed concern that the parish is not welcoming, that it's difficult for difficult to feel part of the community, and that there was no life in the parish. Participants were concerned about the decline in Mass attendance, why people were leaving and how we can welcome them back.

BULLETIN

- In most sharing sessions, many comments were voiced about the bulletin needing to be revamped and focus on providing current and accurate information
- Make better use of the space in the bulletin
- Requests were made for faith-based inserts, Mass readings for the week and similar types of content
- Procedure for submitting bulletin submissions needs to be more widely publicized so that all appropriate requests are honored

For many, the bulletin is the main source of communication in our parish. In sharing sessions, however, comments about the need to improve our bulletin were raised. While some requested additional features (prayer list, etc.) raise privacy concerns, information that is public (our deceased, those receiving sacraments, opportunities for outreach, etc.) should be included.

CATECHESIS for ADULTS and CHILDREN

- Sharing session participants expressed a sincere desire for more formation in the faith for both children and adults
- Both adults and children need instruction in the basics of our faith
- The primary themes expressed as topics for adults included: understanding the parts of the Mass, and why "we do what we do", catechesis on the Real Presence in the Eucharist
- More educational opportunities for adults, including Bible Studies
- Use of the homily to explain spiritual and theological topics
- Faith Formation for children and teens needs to focus on the importance of Mass, encouraging active participation in the Mass by both children and their parents

The need for a more robust faith formation program for adults was mentioned frequently during the sharing sessions. Participants cited a lack of knowledge about the parts of the Mass, Scripture, the liturgical year and the general catechism of the Church. However, programs presented to meet these needs are poorly attended. Finding new and different ways to present adult formation on topics such as those mentioned, ways for adults to gather in faith-sharing groups, and more inclusion of the topics in homilies as appropriate are necessary.

Faith Formation for children needs to address the basics of faith, and not just in sacramental years. A major concern is the lack of participation of young families in the Mass. Mass is a priority. Participation in both Mass and Faith Formation classes assists children in making connections between what they learn in class and practicing their faith.

CHURCH ENVIRONMENT/CAMPUS/CEMETERY

- Beauty of the building, special place to worship
- Have many assets other churches do not (parish center, hall, etc.)
- Prayerful atmosphere
- Parish Center renovated, not sold, and being used
- Structure is nice, but building needs TLC, funding
- Better upkeep/maintenance of the entire campus including both structural work (church roof, pews, etc.) and maintenance of the grounds (get rid of weeds, etc.)
- Numerous concerns were raised about the dog droppings evident on the campus
- Cemetery not as well cared for as in the past; conditions need improvement
- Rules of the cemetery need to be better communicated

While all agreed that we have a beautiful church and more than adequate buildings, there was much discussion on much needed maintenance and improvements to the campus and cemetery.

COMMUNICATION

- Many participants cited a need for better communication
- Communication gap between pastoral and lay leadership, parish organizations and parishioners
- Questions were raised about how the parish functions and who is on the Parish and Finance Councils
- Need to improve consistency of communications so that it is the same for both Masses

Our communications (orally, in the bulletin and online) express who we are as a parish. Parishioners need to know what is happening in the parish, as well as in the deanery, diocese and wider community. Effective communication shows parishioners that we care about them.

FINANCES

- Generosity of the parishioners
- A spirit of giving
- When a need arises, the parish steps up to provide needed funding
- Are generous, give as much as they can, support needs and appeals
- Why don't we have electronic/automatic payment available?
- Those who attend Mass feel the need to give more because fewer are attending and giving
- Suggestions for fundraisers was given but told can't do them until more parishioners return

The issue of the financial status of the parish came up in all sharing sessions and is a major concern. Questions arose around how long we can afford to function as we are, staffing concerns as well as current spending levels.

IMPACTS of COVID

- We are thankful that coming out of the Covid restrictions, our parish has begun to return to activities and functions.
- Parishioners thought that coming back from Covid the parish did a good job of following guidelines for gathering (masks, no holy water, space between people and between pews, etc.)
- Lost people due to the lack of communication and not live-streaming Masses.
- Pastor did not provide adequate guidance during Covid.

Although sharing session participants overall felt safe coming back to Mass due to the decrease in the severity of Covid, some are still reluctant to return to church. Returning to a sense of normalcy can be possible with diligence to Covid trends and the provision of safety nets such as hand sanitizer, etc. A vision of hope for the future of our parish is likely if people feel safe when attending Mass and parish functions.

LEADERSHIP

- Strong core group of parishioners who provide leadership
- Many other parishioners help behind the scenes
- Leadership is stagnant – same people have been parish leaders for many years, we are not tapping into the gifts of others
- Key leaders are seen as wanting the parish to remain exclusively for older parishioners
- Pastor does not have an office or regular office hours
- Pastor does not regularly provide information
- Pastor does not regularly lead the parish in responding in a faith-based manner to current events in the community or in the world

Although participants expressed gratitude for those who have taken on leadership roles, there is a concern that new people, those in the pews and those registered as parishioners, need to step forward and assume leadership roles. New leaders need to be dreamers, visionaries and cheerleaders for the parish so that our parish can move forward.

LITURGY/MASS/SACRAMENTS

- Mass, including the Real Presence of the Lord in the Eucharist, Adoration and the sacraments keep people coming back
- Many noted a need for Mass to be more spiritually uplifting and reverent
- Some felt that at times the celebration of the Mass is too light-hearted and disjointed
- Participants expressed a desire to be spiritually fed and are looking for homilies that are meaningful, connect Scripture to the current times and are inviting for both adults and youth
- A need for homilies to speak to compassion, love and joy was also voiced
- Holy Days of Obligation need to be highlighted in the announcements, bulletin and website, and parishioners encourage to attend

- Several people commented on the lack of reverence for the Eucharist along with the need for more opportunities for Adoration (perhaps in the evening to meet needs of those who work)
- Outside of the Saturday afternoon time, it is difficult to schedule confession
- The content of the Prayers of the Faithful (intercessions) came up at the majority of the sharing sessions. Intercessions need to be more personal and timely, inviting us to pray for those impacted by current events, and also include petitions of gratitude and remembrance of our recently deceased.
- Some respondents felt the current Mass schedule is convenient. Others would like more Mass time options.
- Concerns were raised that there are inconsistencies between the 4:00 p.m. Saturday vigil Mass and the 9:00 a.m. Sunday Mass.
- Questions were raised about how altar servers, Eucharistic Ministers and lectors are and should be utilized during Mass.

In the time since the Walking Together initiative began, we have addressed many of the concerns relating to liturgical ministry, ushers, and music. With the hiring of a new organist, who is also looking to revive our choir, we now have music at both Masses.

As a parish, we cannot lose sight of the importance of our faith and how we worship our God. Our conversations cited a need for more uplifting and engaging liturgies. People want homilies that help us to understand who we are as the People of God, and how to live out our faith in the 21st century.

PASTOR

- Pastor seen as genuine, friendly and personable
- During Mass refers to parishioners as “family”
- While some enjoy the homilies, more expressed a need for homilies to be more connected to the current times
- Pastor needs to be more engaged in current situations, humor and jokes are not always appropriate or necessary
- Parishioners need to feel more energy from the pastor
- Provided little guidance during and coming out of Covid
- Not seen as engaged, involved or visible in the wider community or ecumenical events
- Lack of knowing parishioners personally is evident in homilies and at funerals

The pastor is seen as genuine, friendly and personable. However, many commented on his lack of engagement, not knowing parishioners personally and level of energy. As the most visible representative of St. Edward in the parish and in the community, it is crucial that he maintain a professional appearance and is actively engaged in the life of the parish and wider community.

PEOPLE and GROUPS

- A spirit of feeling welcome which starts at the front door
- We are a small parish, people know each other and come together as a community
- Recognize and acknowledge each other outside of the church
- A place where we feel at home, comfortable with each other and have a sense of warmth and safety
- There can be a feeling that we are an insular community and that it can be hard to fit in if not “born and bred” in Stafford
- People are appreciative of all the work done behind the scenes at the parish. However, we need more help and parishioners need to step forward
- There is good cooperation between the organizations in the parish, with many belonging to more than one group
- Parishioners are looking for opportunities to socialize and share with each other (dinners, coffee & donuts, etc.)
- We are thankful that post-covid the organizations are returning to a sense of normalcy
- Need more parishioners to voice opinions and come forward with new ideas
- It can be hard to bring new ideas/visions to organizations. There is a sense of a “this is how we’ve always done it” mentality

We are a caring parish. As a community, we strive to be welcoming, yet need to be more aware that as a small parish it can be hard for newcomers to fit in. We are thankful for the efforts of organizations and individuals who give so much of their time (in many cases behind the scenes), but we need to encourage new ideas. Many expressed the desire for new initiatives, but don’t want to take on the leadership to make them happen. As a parish, we are at a point where we need *everyone* to share their time, talent and treasure as we move forward. This is our parish, and its future is the responsibility of each and every one of us.

PRESENCE in the COMMUNITY

- Strong feeling of a warm, welcoming community that feels like family.
- A long, rich history that is steeped in tradition made the parish a pillar within the Stafford community.
- In the past, the parish was a community that people could turn to for help.
- Currently, the participants noted that the parish has a lack of outreach to the wider community and does not participate in town ecumenical and civic events.
- Absence of involvement in social justice issues and serving the underprivileged and marginalized in the community.

While many felt our parish is welcoming, some voiced the opinion that we need to do more. When we are sent forth after Mass, we need to be a force for good in our community and the world – to display our faith in action. Becoming more active in community outreach, participating in ecumenical and civic events, and becoming more aware of social justice issues will enable the parish to remain a vibrant piece of life in Stafford.

TECHNOLOGY

- Make better use of available technologies to make Mass available to those who cannot attend such as our infirm and homebound
- Live-stream at least one Mass per weekend
- Younger people use technology as their major vehicle of accessing information
- Use the parish website and social media as an integral piece of communicating with parishioners and others
- Communicate all the good that is happening in our parish using technology as a means of building community

In the 21st century, the use of technology as a primary means of communication is essential. If we want younger people and families to get information about all the our parish has to offer, we need to invest both resources and time in this area. Strides have been made in keeping our parish website updated on a regular basis, and in the use of the *Flock Notes* email system to keep parishioners informed. Parishioners who have not yet done so are encouraged to share their email addresses with the parish.

TRADITION

- Long and rich history over the past 155 years
- Has been my family church
- Received sacraments here
- Kids knew if they needed help, they had a community of adults they could turn to
- We have a foundation from the past that continues to sustain us
- Learn from the past to bring us to what we are doing now

We know and love our long, rich history and tradition. We want to remember and build on our foundation while moving into the future.

YOUNG FAMILIES

- Get families back to the parish, and not just for sacraments
- Congregation getting older, not seeing a lot of families with children
- Need a nursery
- By-product of closing the school – no families in the pews
- Only a very few parents of young families responded to the invitation to attend the sharing sessions despite numerous attempts to encourage them to do so through personal invitation, faith formation emails, Flock Notes and the website.

There is a deep concern about the lack of young families with children in our parish and how we can appeal to them. There is a consensus that younger families are coming for the sacraments –baptism, confirmation, marriage - and not for Mass and worship. Participants feel that there is a need for social activities that involve young children and their families. The parish needs to make better use of social media to reach out to young families.

YOUTH

- Young teens, unmarried young adults are underserved
- Youth are not aware of how they can be involved
- Young people need to be invited and intentionally included
- Need to keep young people engaged
- Lack of young adults in parish

There was a general concern that there is a lack of teens and young adults in our parish. As the only young adult to participate in our parish stated:

"I only come occasionally – I found a Catholic community while in college that I still attend. There is a lack of people my age (mid 20s), a lack of a peer group to worship with".

We cannot keep doing what we have been doing in the past as in the times there was CYO. There is a need to show young people that "God is cool". We need to focus on programs that will encourage and grow youth/young adult participation, perhaps through using social media which is monitored, more contemporary music, etc.

IN CONCLUSION

With this report, the first phase of our Walking Together initiative comes to an end. However, our journey to invigorate the life of our parish is just beginning. We are extremely grateful to all those who have participated thus far: those who attended sharing sessions, those who served as facilitators or scribes, those who prayed for the initiative's success, those who sent in comments.

It is now the work of the Parish Council to prioritize goals that will form the path forward and develop action plans to achieve those goals. However, the Parish Council cannot do this work alone.

Through our sharing, parishioners expressed a deep love for our parish, and all the good things that happen here. Although concerns are numerous, parishioners see hope, and have a positive vision for what we, as a parish, can do to meet the challenges that we face. The optimism and determination to grow in faith and invigorate our parish gives great hope for the future. Our visions are best described as knowing and loving our past but moving forward with visionary leadership.

The path forward involves all of us.
We need everyone's time and talents.
We need each one of us to step forward.

Let us continue to ask the Holy Spirit to guide us, give us the wisdom we need to make good decisions, and to provide the strength we need to continue to walk together.

Walking Together Committee Members: Andrea Broer, Sandy Comarella, Joanne Deskus, Zofia Fitzgerald, Corinne Lorenzet and Laurel Stark.