

## Strategic Overview

### 3. STRATEGY FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

#### ASSUMPTIONS & VALUES

Catholicism is first and foremost a call to holiness. Underpinning this call, is the belief that all men were created to be in relationship with God, to encounter his love and mercy, and to live in the freedom of being a beloved child of God. Without knowledge of the precepts of Christianity the call to holiness is an empty shell; the application of practical precepts of Christianity, which flow directly from our understanding of salvation history, in particular, the teachings of Jesus Christ, is substantial to a faith filled life.

The teachings of the Catholic Church evolved over some 2000 years; they are clear, firm and relevant. They are often not the same as today's societal values. Catholic values are still very relevant to society, precisely because they are foundational to much of our public institutions such as our legal system, education, health care, elder care, and charitable activities such as soup kitchens.

Our Christian Education challenge must be understood in terms of the trends in society namely:

- Declining Catholic culture and community support characteristic of secular society;
- The limitations of our parochial schools system in teaching the Catholic faith;
- Competing societal values that can confuse and confound the relevance of Catholicism; and,
- The post-modern tendency to question why and how is it important to their everyday life.

In response to this societal reality, we need to adapt our strategy to increase people's understanding of the depth of the Catholic faith and its potential benefits to their mental and physical health and wellbeing that result as they participate and engage.

Left unresolved, the trends evident in society will result in fewer and fewer people growing up knowing the authentic Catholic faith and inevitably, as the relevance of the Catholic faith to their everyday lives continues to erode, they will drift away and may even eventually oppose Catholic values.

*“Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: “We have always done it this way”. I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods... in their respective communities.”<sup>1</sup>*

## **STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT**

We also acknowledge, even in a Parish like AoLP, that our performance has fallen short and a more intentional effort is required. To that end, it is important to pursue three Strategic Initiatives premised on the following convictions:

- a) That concise, clear, relevant messages about why the Catholic faith matters and has value, will reach beyond and be picked up outside the Parish and consequentially, Annunciation will be a beacon of light for others wanting knowledge of the Catholic faith;
- b) That an effective preparation of sacramental candidates will lead them and their families to become engaged parishioners; and,
- c) That our missionary discipleship formation deepens the Gospel in the lives of believers, brings about the re-conversion of those who received the gospel but live it only nominally and, takes the joy of the Gospel to the unchurched.

To address these needs, three broad Strategic Initiatives are proposed:

- 1. Communicating the value of the Catholic Faith;
- 2. Turning Sacramental Candidate into Lifelong Parishioners; and,
- 3. Enlarged Adult Faith Studies Program

### **STRATEGIC INITIATIVE 1: COMMUNICATING THE VALUE OF THE CATHOLIC FAITH**

In examining AoLP’s broader environment we must realistically note and accept the broad societal trends identified in our earlier analysis. We acknowledge that if unresolved, fewer and fewer people will see the relevance of the Catholic faith to their everyday lives and is likely to continue to erode our member base.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, December, 2013, paragraph 33

Accordingly, we propose a proactive communications initiative that enables Annunciation's vibrant 60 plus Ministries to become an essential component of Communicating the Value of the Catholic Faith. To do so requires a process of formation, empowerment, and intentional planning of a broad range of effective communications tools such as the parish bulletin, weekly homilies, and testimonials. With these tools the parish website, parish members themselves, and a Church information/reception centre (to be located in the church vestibule) become both virtual and analog channels of information.

To address these needs, a Communication Outreach function is proposed as a priority action. The key components of the project would include:

1. **Establishing a Communication Outreach Champion;**
2. **Establishing a communication database** of AoLP member registry, AoLP volunteers, and key external stakeholders such as schools, universities, the press, other faith groups in our community service organizations regardless of religious affiliation, diocesan organizations; and,
3. **Differentiating targeted publics** with particular emphasis on younger people, and the 25 to 45 age cohort.

**Time Line:** #1 — 6 months; #2 — 6 months to 1 year; #3 — up to 18 months

**Project Scope:** Integrate into Annual Ministry Planning workshop

**Estimate Cost:** Cost to set up databases and create communication materials

**Responsible Ministry:** Christian Education Ministry / Communications Outreach

The goal of this strategic initiative is to help all Ministries, and especially Ministry leaders, understand how to effectively communicate the merits of the Catholic way of life and the joy of the gospel. Most Catholics receive formation in how to grow in holiness personally through the application of the precepts of Christianity. However, not many know how to communicate its merits. This is new territory for the parish; we need to equip ourselves to do this, in our daily lives, and in ministry.

The desired outcome of this initiative is to a) communicate in appropriate, unique, consistent, frequent, and continuously to people in ways they will understand and find relevant; and, b) maintain continuity in messaging over time.

Details for of this initiative are outlined in Strategic Initiative 3-1.

## STRATEGIC INITIATIVE 2: TURN SACRAMENTAL CANDIDATES INTO LIFELONG PARISHIONERS

### **Current Context**

Although Annunciation offers good opportunities for sacramental faith formation, many from the Parish who could benefit, don't. For example, most participants of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd come from outside the parish. Currently, Sacramental faith formation opportunities are isolated and not accessible to other age groups, even though continuity and renewal of knowledge of the sacraments would be beneficial to all.

A vital sign that cause concern is that a very small percentage of parents of the children going through the sacraments, and by extension the children as well, continue on at Annunciation as regular parishioners. Research<sup>2</sup> in the U.S. has shown that 85% of young Catholics stop practicing their faith within 10 years. One of the major reason for this breakdown points to the fact that while parents wish to have their children go through sacramental preparation, they themselves are not attending Mass services on a regular basis. This results in sacramental candidates getting mixed messages, and once they've received the sacraments there is no positive reinforcement. Of course, there are also many other competing priorities such hockey, ballet, gymnastics, golfing, etc. However if the parents do not demonstrate the importance of mass by their attendance, an ambivalent message to the child.

The outcome we envision from this initiative is that ALL who go through the sacramental preparation process, the children and their families will all become engaged parishioners. This means that:

- Parents and children will want (not be pushed) to attend Mass at AoLP on a regular basis and they will be happier people for it; and,
- The whole family will willingly engage and will partake in the benefits of Catholic community.

To achieve this aim, the following action project is proposed:

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<sup>2</sup> See [dynamiccatholic.com/confirmation/](http://dynamiccatholic.com/confirmation/)

## **1. Sacrament Vision Alignment with Supporting AoLP Ministries**

- Introduce families that have received a sacrament to the parish;
- Announce it the Sunday before (see communication plan in Issue: Knowledge of the Catholic faith & faith formation);
- Invite parish to meet the families after mass;
- Within on week (on a Thursday) place a follow-up call about looking forward to seeing you on Sunday;
- Present them with a copy of “Best Version of Yourself”;
- Devise a plan of social events to engage them in a program of involvement that is meets their needs – e.g. participating as volunteers, Discovery faith studies, introducing marriage prep couples to the parish, etc.;
- Mentoring couples – identify “low hanging fruit” and engage people by pairing them with mentoring couples; and,
- Hold a retreat to train sacramental heads that the #1 goal is to keep people completing and returning for sacramental preparation.

If successful, community life at Annunciation will be strengthened by an increase in parishioners, visitors and seekers, and people coming to the sacraments.

**Time Line: Year 1:** This strategic initiative must be integrated with the Discipleship Formation Program outlined in the 4th Strategy: Strengthening of All Ministries

**Project Scope:** Needs seamless integration with other Ministry plans

**Estimate Cost:** As outline in the Discipleship Formation Program

This strategic initiative is complementary to that outline in Strategic Initiative for Discipleship Formation Program.

## **2. Participate in the Annual Ministry Planning Workshop**

The desired outcome of the annual ministry planning workshop is to bring the key ministry leaders to reflect on the challenge of living the “Joy of the Gospel” through an intentional examination of Ministry plans, challenges, resources requirements, and coordination. As explained above, this is a critical goal for the Strategy for Christian Education.

The details of the Annual Ministry Planning workshop project are more fully articulated in the 4th Strategy for Strengthening All Ministries.

**Time Line: Year 1:** Fall of each year;

**Project Scope:** A 1 day planning retreat format for 2 representatives from each of AoLP's 60 ministries

**Estimate Cost:** Cost of the event would be marginal

Details for of this initiative are outlined in Strategic Initiative 3-2.

### STRATEGIC INITIATIVE 3: ENLARGED ADULT FAITH STUDIES PROGRAM

Catholic adults face the challenge of modelling exemplary Christian behaviours by being a positive force in their families, place of work, communities, and in their country. Walking this path in our modern secular world requires an enduring personal relationship with the Lord. Yet, research indicates that less than 30% of Catholics who go to church regularly have a personal relationship with God<sup>3</sup>.

Research by the Gallup Group<sup>4</sup> clearly demonstrates that parishes that advise and assist members in their spiritual growth journey reap an 'engagement dividend' through higher attendance rates, attraction of new members, and higher collection rates. In a similar vein, Pope John-Paul II described the need for a "new evangelization" commitment by the faithful to:

1. Proclaim the Gospel to all people;
2. Help bring about the re-conversion of those who received the gospel but live it only nominally; and,
3. Deepen the Gospel in the lives of believers.

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<sup>3</sup> Forming Intentional Disciples, Sherry A. Weddell, 2012, Catherine of Siena Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Gallup 12 Questions to growing an engaged church

This has set the context and justification for a dynamic adult faith study program in our parish. AoLP's faith studies were initiated in 2012 as the means to launching the Stewardship Parish initiative, and answering the call for A Year of Faith made by Pope Francis.

Those who started in a group of 5 or more have stayed together; where they started Discovery together, they have progressed together through all five levels. Some of these groups have expressed an interest to continue on with other formation tools. The success of the faith study program has been impressive — well over 200 parishioners have completed one or more levels of the 5 level course program. The parish will soon be “commissioning” our first cohort of faith study participants who have completed the Level 5 faith study.

Long time parishioners report renewed joy, enlivened prayer life, enlightened faith, and strengthened commitment as benefits to participating in faith studies. Others felt it provided a good opportunity to reflect on essential truths, a welcomed opportunity to share ones faith and learn from one another, and satisfaction with the small group format.

Our current faith studies, while successful, do not fully meet this broad range of demands. For example, the Discovery Series is designed to meet the needs of items 2 and 3 above; proclaiming the Gospel requires preparation as intentional disciples and an understanding of the conversions processes; while the needs of someone, unfamiliar with Christianity, requires what might be described as a 'Pre-Discovery' training for the unchurched. Our long standing RCIA training fits into the spectrum at that point where a candidate is ready to make a commitment to becoming a Catholic. It does not address the needs of someone who is just 'kicking tires' at the pre-commitment stage, nor has RCIA proven effective in engendering a personal relationship with God.

This strategic initiative aims to identify and fill the gaps of our current adult faith formation requirements through the following project:

#### **1. Faith Study Continuum Project**

- Carefully assess the current faith study experience;
- Determine the 'gaps' (success/failures) including experience of participants;
- Identify performance requirements given our needs;
- Examine best practices in other jurisdictions;
- Select appropriate solutions and integrate into a training continuum; and,

- Implement leaders training and faith study offerings as necessary.

If done successfully, we should see a renewed interest in faith studies, enrolment from segments who have not previously participated, and a decided up tic in members becoming missionary disciples in the broader community.

**Time Line:** 6 months - there is a need to determine the faith study continuum and decide on options to be offered in the fall as part of the Stewardship of Time and Talent.

**Project Scope:** Requires care assessment of additional effort

**Estimate Cost:** Cost of the event would be marginal

Details for of this initiative are outlined in Strategic Initiative 3-3.