



St. Matthew Catholic Church Focus Group Report

On October 9 and 10, 2021, parishioners were invited to participate in “Planning our Journey Focus Groups,” designed to gather information about the parish, create an action plan, and re-ignite the parish as the parish begins to emerge from the effects of the pandemic. An open invitation was made to all parishioners from the pulpit on October 9 and 10 to participate with in-person sign-ups in the narthex after mass. The invitation appeared in the parish bulletin and parishioners received an email invitation with a link to an online sign-up tool.

114 parishioners (46 women, 26 men, 42 youth) representing the pastoral council, school, and parish community-at-large attended the focus group sessions. We had representatives from all age groups (the oldest professed to being 89 with the youngest being 13. We had long-time parishioners (57 years) to brand new members, joining in 2021. Separate sessions were held for the pastoral council, parish staff, 8th grade school students, and high school students, as well as an online survey that went out to all youth ministry students. There were 15 sessions in all. Father Bill Stumpf, the pastor was present at all but 4 sessions (due to scheduling conflicts.)

After prayer and words of welcome/thanks, participants were provided guidelines for the session: all answers are good answers, stay focused on gratitude and appreciation, share thoughts in present or future tense, listen to others, wait your turn to speak, and avoid side conversations.

Participants were invited to share their answers to three questions:

1. *What is going well at St. Matthew?* This was the “*discovery*” question. The participants were asked to be as specific as they could, naming programs, experiences, and people. Participants spent time in personal reflection as they wrote their answers on sticky notes before sharing with the group “round robin” style, with each person sharing one new response until all responses were heard. The facilitator captured the comments on chart paper. Tally marks were kept for repeat answers. Notes were collected at the end of the session to be sure all thoughts were captured.
2. *How can St. Matthew be better?* This was the “*dream*” question. The participants were asked, if money were no object and there were no limitations, to share ideas to improve our parish and/or community. Participants turned and talked to one other person to share ideas together for ten minutes. One person was asked to be the note taker for the pair. Each pair shared their ideas with the whole group while they were recorded on chart paper by the facilitator.
3. *What can we do to get better?* This was the “*design*” question. Using a whole group discussion, participants were invited to make suggestions on steps we could take to get to that dream state. They were encouraged to share ideas we could do right now with minimal investment of time and/or money.

Participant responses were recorded in a chart divided into broad categories that reflected emerging themes. What follows is a report on those themes.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sandra J. Patel". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sandra J. Patel

Discover: What is going well at St. Matthew?

BUILDING AND FACILITY: St. Matthew has a beautiful campus with reasonably good facilities. St. Matthew has a good location in our city. The parking lot is easy to use with ample parking close to the building.

COMMUNICATION: We communicate well through email, the parish bulletin, the electronic bulletin, and school newsletters. Live streaming of masses was important during the pandemic.

COMMUNITY (PEOPLE, VOLUNTEERS, DESCRIPTORS): In every single focus group session, the theme of a warm, welcoming, friendly community was expressed. People feel that St. Matthew is an extension of their family - a home - where they can come to connect with friends. St. Matthew is multi-generational, which reflects a collective history. It is diverse and inclusive, where you can “come as you are.” People are generous, servant leaders, who give tremendous amounts of time and talent to the parish. When there is a need, the parishioners of St. Matthew respond. There are many ways to be involved: service, social, and spiritual. The RCIA Team and the Arts and Environment Committee exemplify this response.

FAITH FORMATION AND CATECHESIS: St. Matthew has an excellent sacramental prep program: Baptism, First Eucharist, and Confirmation. This keeps families connected to our Catholic faith. For the adults, the men’s and women’s retreats are excellent opportunities to grow in faith and connect with others in the parish. The scripture study is a very strong ministry that continues to grow. Not only does the group study the bible, but they also learn about the faith/catechism.

LITURGY AND WORSHIP: The variety of mass times provides multiple opportunities for worship (Mass), as well as different opportunities for prayer (communion services, Rosary, Stations of the Cross). Each mass has its own style and feels like its own small community within the larger parish community. People feel uplifted when they leave mass due to the homilies that instruct with practical ways to live the Gospel message and the wonderful music ministry. The music ministry has committed, talented people who enhance the worship experience. The Children’s Liturgy of the Word is excellent. The lectors, mass greeters, ushers, eucharistic ministers, and altar servers are important to the worship experience.

MINISTERIAL/SACRAMENTAL: There are a variety of ministries to meet the needs of our parishioners. Advent and Lenten programs bring people to church and inspire their relationship with Christ. The Peace Meal funeral luncheons are a beautiful ministry that meets the needs of a grieving family.

RELATIONAL/SOCIAL: “We are a social parish.” There are many gatherings and social events that bring people together. Some are tied to prayer and worship, like Stations of the Cross with Fish Fries and coffee and donuts or First Saturday Happy Hour after mass. But others are intended simply as social gatherings. The chili supper is a favorite event, as is the Gala. The large CYO sports program is an important gathering function for school-aged children and their families.

ST. MATTHEW SCHOOL: St Matthew School is a wonderful ministry of the parish that keeps us vibrant and growing. The teachers, staff and administration care about the children and families and they are dedicated to a quality education for the children. There is a strong sense of friendship among the students and families. The Parent Faculty Association (PFA) is actively involved and creative.

SERVICE AND OUTREACH: St. Matthew is actively involved in community outreach through many great programs. These programs are visible to the parish community, so they are a constant sign of our call to serve the poor: St. Vincent de Paul Society, Birthline crib, Harvest for the Hungry Garden, Haiti Committee, Dr. Ellen's mission in Africa and prayer shawl ministry. The parish garden is a unique ministry and is seen as an important one in the parish. The Men's Club, while an opportunity for fellowship, is an active organization, giving generously of time, talent, and treasure.

STAFF: We have an approachable pastor, who is warm and open. The parish staff is responsive with good processes in place. Lay leadership in the parish is strong with new energy and ideas.

Dream: How can we become even better?

Top 10 Dreams (in order of responses, highest to lowest):

COMMUNITY: "Fill the pews" by bringing more families back to church and new families into our parish. More families, more engagement, more connection with others in a meaningful way.

MINISTERIAL/SACRAMENTAL: Focus on young adults. Begin a ministry program that allows them to connect to their faith and each other.

COMMUNITY: Personal Invitation goes a long way! Use this as a strategy to engage parishioners across ministries, programs, service, and outreach.

BUILDING AND FACILITY: Develop a capital improvement plan: look across the entire campus and make a list of everything that needs to be repaired, cleaned, improved, painted, and/or updated. Prioritize the list. Raise funds as needed. Do every task properly. Hiring an interior designer to create a plan would be beneficial.

RELATIONAL/SOCIAL: Have more spiritual/social gatherings that allow people to be connected. Match people at similar life stages or interests through various events like date night, movie night, trivia games, "Mass in the Grass", etc.

COMMUNITY: With the goal of increasing volunteerism, create in-depth ministry descriptions, which includes ministry activity, how to be involved, time commitment, role descriptions, and ministry outcomes. This will make it easier for people to step into the ministry. When someone can provide witness of the ministry impact, it could encourage involvement. Effectively communicate needs to the parish.

COMMUNITY: Many events, projects, and ministries are run by one person or a small group of the same people year-after-year. Break them down into smaller parts so they feel more manageable. Create job descriptions and succession plans so that leadership rotates. Provide cross-training or introduce an apprenticeship approach where people learn and then step into leadership.

COMMUNICATION: Create a consistent communication procedure for the pastoral council, commissions, and committees to share their work and progress with the parish. Increase their visibility so people know and recognize the leaders.

COMMUNITY: Be a more welcoming parish; an open community that welcomes all people. Up our hospitality game. How do we include new families in our parish?

COMMUNITY: The school is a ministry of the parish; strengthen the relationship between parish families and school families. Acknowledge public school choice as an equally valuable option for families and work to build bridges.

Other Important Dreams:

BUILDING AND FACILITY

1. Update the sanctuary and narthex to modernize its appearance and make it more welcoming
2. Continue live streaming.
3. Evaluate the space we have. Determine who uses the space, how it gets used and what additional space we need. Build spaces dedicated to adult ministry, young adult ministry, outdoor education, a larger, efficient kitchen with storage space, meditation garden, paved walking path around perimeter of the campus, etc.
4. Improve the sound system in the sanctuary for both the music ministry and for people who are hearing-impaired.
5. Increase and improve technology in school and church so that students can have 1:1 (student to computer) in all grades and screens can be added to church and narthex for mass and communication.

COMMUNICATION

1. Evaluate the communication procedure for the parish. Update the parish website to make it more user-friendly and use social media and other online tools to communicate more consistently with parishioners. Fr. Bill's homilies could be used for small tweets or posts throughout the week.
2. Create an information kiosk in the narthex. The best option may be a television screen similar to the one in the school lobby. This is where photos of parish events, new families, and deceased parishioners could scroll as well as upcoming events, ministry descriptions, and volunteer requests.

COMMUNITY

1. Bring back the Ministry Fair, but also change the format to engage more people in the various ministries in the parish. The goal would be to have more people involved so the work doesn't fall on the same few people all the time. Ensure that follow-up occurs when someone expresses an involvement interest.

EVANGELIZATION

1. Our community should be a "Touchpoint to Christ."
2. We should invite neighbors to our events and celebration of the sacraments.
3. Invite families of school children who do not attend mass or belong to our parish.

FAITH FORMATION/CATECHESIS

1. Develop a program for Adult Catechism, a refresher course for our faith.
2. Introduce other retreat opportunities focused on people's needs and refresh current men's and women's retreats by varying locations.

3. Re-start small faith sharing groups. Help match people by topic or their place in life (empty nesters, young parents, young single adults, mature adults, etc.). This may also include CRHP or other similar programs.
4. Have a true ministry focus on youth and develop a more robust youth ministry program.

FINANCIAL

1. Actively nurture the existing school and parish endowments to relieve tuition increases, attract/retain/reward staff, and plan for long-term building needs.

LITURGY and WORSHIP

1. Start a children's choir that sings at weekend masses year-round
2. Eucharistic Adoration as a regular prayer opportunity
3. More opportunities for prayer that honor people with work schedules and young families. Early morning and late evening options would be helpful.

MINISTERIAL/SACRAMENTAL

1. Focus on young families to connect children, but also the parents. Raising children in the faith, keeping your prayer life engaged amid raising children, and other topics would help build strong Catholic families.
2. Start a Mature Adult Ministry that includes components of social, service, and outreach.
3. Create opportunities for families to connect (see suggestion 2.)
4. Create opportunities for women of the parish to connect. Women's Club?

RELATIONAL/SOCIAL

1. Create and promote events after mass. Once people are at church they may linger for interaction.

SCHOOL

1. Increase school enrollment by creating a positive buzz.

SERVICE and OUTREACH

1. Re-invigorate existing programs and increase volunteer hours by providing detailed information about what is needed, the time commitment involved, and who to contact if interested.

STAFF

1. Review current positions of school and parish staff to ensure that qualified professional staff are filling all roles. This includes appropriate job descriptions with expectations for performance.
2. Establish goals and mission for parish staff that focuses on succession plans, cross training to respond to requests during vacations or extended illnesses and weekend office hours.
3. Create a strategic plan focused on full-time and part-time parish staff positions to support the needs of a growing parish: youth ministry, confirmation, young adult/adult/mature adult ministry, volunteer coordinator, young family ministry, administrative assistant, and receptionist.

Design: How do we get there?

BUILDING AND FACILITY

1. Explore a capital campaign for the physical needs of the campus.
2. Tap into volunteers who are already willing to help.
3. Spruce up the building. It is looking old and unmaintained.

COMMUNICATION

1. Provide evidence that change is happening. "You have been heard."
2. It is our mission to "make disciples of all nations." We are here to engage and connect with Christ. How do we make that known?
3. Improve communications. Go beyond bulletins and utilize more electronic options for communicating with people. "Sign-up Genius" (online communication platform), text messaging, social media platforms, etc. Meet people where they are.
4. Have a Ministry Fair to celebrate all we have done and what we can do with the right people.
5. Spotlight ministry programs throughout the year, Representatives could share the ministry/program at mass, the impact/outcomes, be available in the narthex after mass, and provide details in the bulletin: who, what, when, where, how, why.
6. Have an information kiosk, bulletin board, or media screen in the narthex with information readily available to people. This could include upcoming event information, Catholic trivia, photos of past events, photos of new parishioners, photos of deceased parishioners, photos of "Families of the week", volunteer requests, etc.
7. We have so many great activities, programs, and ministries, but do they all fit our mission? How many people does each touch, and does it lead them to Christ?

COMMUNITY

1. Look at how we welcome new parishioners and make the process less cumbersome. Perhaps develop a series of new parishioner meet and greet events. Make sure the new parishioner packet includes a complete list of opportunities for involvement. A personal connection with another parishioner would help enfold them in the flock.
2. Invite people to come back to mass by personal invitation. Phone calls and personal letters to all parishioners would bring people back to church.
3. Do a call-out for women interested in starting a women's club.
4. Start small faith sharing groups for young adult singles. Bring them together in faith and for support of each other.
5. Sponsor a St. Matthew School Alumni event with the goal of developing an alumni association to keep them connected to the parish. Honor graduates for their achievements in the community.
6. Divide the focus group findings by active commissions, committees, and ministry. Develop strategic plans, projects, and next steps based on the information. Be sure the plans are transparent with goals that are SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound.
7. Invite young people to share what they would like to see from our church and how they would be willing to participate.

FAITH FORMATION/CATECHESIS

1. Take advantage of programs already in existence to re-energize, re-ignite the parish (dynamic parish, FORMED programs, other church programs.) Build on what we already have.

2. Contemplation AND action: What is our mission and how do we live it? Find ways to help people find their action (CRHP, Cursillo, small faith sharing, scripture study, etc.) to build a foundation for relationship with Christ and the chance to live our faith.

INSPIRATIONAL/GENERAL

1. Start small and be encouraged by even the smallest steps. Celebrate successes.
2. Just smile! It goes a long way in making people feel welcome and opens the door to a new friend.
3. Pray for the Holy Spirit to give us love to share.

RELATIONAL/SOCIAL

1. Bring people together, using their skills, talents, and interests to connect them.

Youth Perspective

Discover: What is going well at St. Matthew?

COMMUNITY (PEOPLE, VOLUNTEERS, DESCRIPTORS): St. Matthew is a strong community that is kind and welcoming. It feels like home (this was also a predominant theme in the adult focus groups.) The students enjoy the fun school events (pep rallies, dress down days) that bring them together as a community. It seems as if more people are attending mass and participating in events, which is good to see.

LITURGY AND WORSHIP: There are a variety of Mass times, and the music ministry enhances the Mass (it's great!). Fr. Bill is awesome. He is a good homilist. The Children's Liturgy of the Word is a good program that gives children the opportunity to hear the Word at their level and provides the youth a chance to receive service hours for helping.

RELATIONAL/SOCIAL: The Chili Supper is a great event that brings people together.

STAFF: There is good food in the cafeteria and the cafeteria staff is very nice. The sports program (CYO) has many options for students. The coaches are excellent. The schoolteachers are understanding, supportive, and caring.

Dream: How can we become even better?

Top 5 Dreams (in order of responses, highest to lowest):

COMMUNITY: Following the sacrament of Confirmation, help connect the students back to the parish community by engaging them in meaningful ways. It would be wise to have that engagement as a natural flow from the sacrament.

COMMUNITY: Engage youth with each other and our parish by beginning youth ministry sooner than high school. If introduced at middle school, students would build a community in which they would want to be involved and not leave.

RELATIONAL/SOCIAL: The youth expressed the dream to have different ways to gather with others like the chili supper, but not the chili supper. They also mentioned more school club opportunities could accomplish the same goal. It may be a good way to engage parish volunteers through club sponsorship.

FAITH FORMATION/CATECHESIS: The youth would like to have retreat experiences focused on their needs from middle school through high school. They are prayerful bonding experiences that connect them to God, each other, and our parish.

SCHOOL: Review the Dress Code policy. Not to eliminate the policy, but to be sure it meets the needs of boys and girls.

Other Important Dreams:

BUILDING AND FACILITY

1. Add an additional gym and improve the current gym. This could be a good spot for gathering.
2. Widen the school hallways so passing time, especially in middle school is less crowded.

COMMUNITY

1. For our community to grow in understanding and accepting a diverse community.

MINISTERIAL/SACRAMENTAL

1. The St. Matthew School students would like more mass and prayer time during their school week.
2. The youth want to be engaged in our Catholic faith at an earlier age in more meaningful ways, both catechesis and service.

SCHOOL

1. Include brain breaks in the school schedule to allow students to rest and re-focus.

SERVICE and OUTREACH

1. The youth have an interest in participating in service opportunities for the community-at-large. While a great opportunity to serve, it is also a meaningful way to connect with others.