BETTER TOGETHER

A SMALL GROUP DISCERNMENT EXPERIENCE FOR PARISHES

Discerning how our community, as a center of charity and mercy, practices stewardship and co-responsibility to help inform the pastoral plans of our parishes and diocese.
“The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be ‘the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters.’

“This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration.

“In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach.

“We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.”

EVANGELII GAUDIUM
THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL
NO. 28
BEING A “CHURCH LIVING IN THE MIDST” OF HER PEOPLE

As I enter my third year as your bishop, I find myself grateful every day for the opportunity to be the shepherd for God’s people here in central and northern Missouri. Your dedication to living as disciples of Christ has been edifying and consoling to me!

At the same time, I read these sentences from Pope Francis’ exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium (“The Joy of the Gospel”),

“The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach” (No. 28).

and I ask, have we fulfilled this vision?

While much good work is happening, we must be responsible stewards and consider what else needs to be done. There are some indicators to suggest we can do more:

• Sacramental practice in our diocese has declined in the past 20 years, most precipitously in weekly Mass attendance. Since 2001, we have seen a 29% decline in Mass attendance, despite our general Catholic population remaining relatively flat.
• The social health index of our communities points to many unmet needs in our communities: single parent families; new arrivals, including refugees fleeing persecution; the workers in our prisons, the incarcerated and their families; the rise in suicides and bankruptcies for farmers.
• There is an unprecedented rise in the number of young people (and even the not-so-young) who claim no affinity to any organized religion.
• Our Church is often characterized as inward-focused, irrelevant and staid, and/or racked by abusive leaders and corruption.

Allowing this status quo to continue not only means we could be responsible for the demise of our Church, but also that we are refusing to embrace our baptismal call to be salt of the earth, a light to the world!

Following up on our Advent series, “A Steward’s Way,” I am inviting every parish and every Catholic in our diocese to join in my pastoral planning process, “Better Together.” By breaking open the Church’s teachings, especially those of the Second Vatican Council and Pope Francis, we want each parish in the diocese to be known as a place of charity and mercy, accomplished by clergy and laity working together, and by being grounded in a spirituality of stewardship.

What does that mean, on a concrete level?
In the weeks leading up to Lent, I met with pastors and parish pastoral council presidents and other parish representatives to explore the pastoral planning process with themes that expand my vision of a diocese, Better Together. The three pillars of that vision are:

- Parishes as centers of mercy and charity,
- The co-responsibility of laity and clergy, and
- A stewardship spirituality rooted in gratitude for God’s blessings.

How that vision is enabled in each parish will be discerned by each of you.

In the discernment process you enter now, your pastor and parish pastoral council will collect your insights to develop a three-year pastoral plan for your parish. We are asking that the plan have two or three goals or activities, to make it attainable.

All parish pastoral plans will be provided to the diocese by July 1, 2020. You pastor and parish pastoral council will continue working on strategic and business planning to answer the details of “who, what, where, when and how” to implement your plan.

By Advent 2020, each parish will be able to answer the question: What two or three activities happening in the parish will show people that your parish is the kind of parish described in “Evangelii Gaudium”?

Using insight gathered from yours and other parishes, the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the Diocesan Presbyteral Council will then develop a diocesan pastoral plan. The diocesan pastoral plan will focus on how the diocese, through its Chancery, can build the capacity of the parishes to accomplish their parish goals.

Along with discernment materials, your parish will have access to data specific to you and your communities, including social health statistics and sacramental participation trends. We know the old saying, “there is nothing more stubborn than facts,” and this is true for our parishes as well. The rural nature of our diocese, the presence of major state universities, the graying of those in our pews, and other realities will inform our plans.

This discernment process is built to be focused outward, not inward; and may differ from any previous small group experiences you’ve had before. I encourage those who have been engaged in weekly reflections on the Scriptures to realize that this work, of discerning God’s will for His people here in our diocese, is essential to your role as a baptized Catholic. Therefore, please consider suspending your regular programming so you can fully participate in this process.

As we enter this discernment, let us continue to ask our patroness, under the title of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, to intercede for us. As Pope Francis wrote in “Evangelii Gaudium”, she is our model for evangelization:

“She is the woman of prayer and work in Nazareth, and she is also Our Lady of Help, who sets out from her town ‘with haste’ to be of service to others. This interplay of justice and tenderness, of contemplation and concern for others” gives us confidence as “we implore her maternal intercession that the Church may become a home for many peoples, a mother for all peoples, and that the way may be opened to the birth of a new world” (No. 288).
GROUP LEARNING AND FAITH SHARING AGREEMENT

Many Catholics meet regularly in their parishes. These groups are known by a variety of names and come under various lay and ecclesial organizations: small Christian communities, Cursillo, Knights of Columbus, ladies’ groups, men’s groups, RENEW, CRHP, TEC, prayer groups, etc. Whatever the name, usually they share five attributes: the members engage in prayer, faith sharing, learning, support and faith-directed action.

The sessions in this booklet include these five attributes. To encourage a healthy and Spirit-filled activity, group members are encouraged to agree to abide by the following:

WELCOMING

• An atmosphere of welcome and hospitality sets a tone. Make sure the setting is comfortable (including the chairs) and the group will not be interrupted by other activities or individuals.
• Encourage people to share something about themselves, if they do not know one another.
• Keep the social and refreshment aspects to a minimum.
• Start and end on time. Each session should take between 60 and 90 minutes.

SHARING

• Commit to coming prepared and being present at all sessions, except for emergencies. The group is lessened when a member is missing.
• Understand this is a “safe place,” for people to share matters of the heart and soul. Respect others’ need for confidentiality.
• Share honestly.
• Listen to others without “correcting,” judging or attempting to preach at them. Ask questions to help you understand better another person’s beliefs, opinions or knowledge.
• Help to ensure everyone who wants to speak has an opportunity to do so by not interrupting others, and by allowing silence so those who are more hesitant may have the time to gather their thoughts.
• Help the group stay on topic.
• Pray for one another and the diocese between sessions.
HOW TO USE THIS PROGRAM

STARTING & ENDING EACH MEETING

• Plan for some “collection” time at the start of each meeting; allowing 5-10 minutes for all of your members to arrive, greet one another and settle in.
• Welcome members promptly (don’t let members visit too long, gently remind them they could visit after the meeting if anyone is causing a delay), open your meeting in prayer, you can use the “Opening Prayer” provided on page 6.
• At the end of each meeting, close with the “Closing Prayer” on page 6.

ROLES AT EACH MEETING

• Ask people at the beginning of the session to serve as readers, prayer leaders, discussion leaders and reporters. These roles can be rotated each week. Be sure the reporter understands his/her role is to complete the Discernment Report at the end of the session and submit it to your pastor.
• Consider making assignments for the next week’s readings at the conclusion of the session.

USING YOUR TIME TOGETHER WELL

• In some cases, additional reading materials, videos or resources are provided alongside your session. In the interest of time, you might consider sending these items out to group members before your meeting.
• While together, ask readers to read their parts to the group. Then, using the discussion questions, open the group up to share thoughts and feelings about the week’s content. Prompt members as needed; while sharing, one voice should not dominate your meeting, and you might consider calling on folks on the edges of the conversation to share their thoughts. Keep in mind, that personalities within small groups differ, some members will need more time to think than others, or may need to be asked directly to share thoughts. Try not to be the “teacher” but help the discussion flow, so that all voices are heard.
• Your reporter should take diligent, relevant notes. While every comment may not fit into the discussion recap, you’ll want to be sure that you capture all of the group’s perspectives and thoughts to prepare your Discernment Report.

SUBMITTING YOUR DISCERNMENT REPORT

After each meeting, you’ll want to submit the Discernment Report included at the end of each session to your pastor. Please use either the printed form in this booklet, or the online form at www.diojeffcity.org/better-together.
• Please submit your report within five days of your meeting, as pastors and parish pastoral councils are collecting these promptly for their own review.
• Be sure to fill out the front and back and to follow all instructions provided on the sheet.
OPENING AND CLOSING PRAYERS

OPENING PRAYER FOR EACH SESSION

A prayer used before every session of the Second Vatican Council

**Leader or All:**
We stand before You, Holy Spirit, conscious of our sinfulness, but aware that we gather in Your name.
Come to us, remain with us, and enlighten our hearts.
Give us light and strength to know Your will, to make it our own, and to live it in our lives.
Guide us by Your wisdom, support us by Your power, for You are God, sharing the glory of Father and Son.
You desire justice for all: enable us to uphold the rights of others; do not allow us to be misled by ignorance or corrupted by fear or favor.
Unite us to Yourself in the bond of love and keep us faithful to all that is true.
As we gather in Your name may we temper justice with love, so that all our decisions may be pleasing to You, and earn the reward promised to good and faithful servants.
You live and reign with the Father and the Son, one God, for ever and ever.
R. Amen.

CLOSING PRAYER FOR EACH SESSION

**Leader:** Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Your faithful.
R. And kindle in them the fire of Your love.
**Leader:** Send forth Your Spirit and they shall be created.
R. And You will renew the face of the earth.
**Leader:** Let us pray.
(After a brief pause for silent prayer, the leader continues:)
Lord, by the light of the Holy Spirit You have taught the hearts of Your faithful.
In the same Spirit help us to discern Your desire for us to be united with one another and with You, and always rejoice in Your consolation.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
R. Amen.
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*Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) No. 28