

DIVINE MERCY PARISH

SACRED HEART CHURCH • ST. PHILIP THE APOSTLE CHURCH

THE WAY FORWARD

5 Year Strategic Plan

FY 2022-2027

**“I am the way, the truth and the life, says the Lord Jesus.”
John 14:16**



DIVINE MERCY PARISH COUNCIL

*Divine Mercy Parish is a Welcoming Community
that Inspires Disciples of Jesus
to Share God's Love and Transform the World.*

THE WAY FORWARD: DIVINE MERCY FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

INTRODUCTION

This plan results from the hard work of the Parish Council which met, prayed, discussed, argued and arrived at a consensus regarding what we need to do over the course of the next five years to grow stronger and better. As you read through the plan, you will notice it unfolds over five years with each year dedicated to a particular theme of parish life: evangelization, community, discipleship, ministry and worship.

Each year, our parish will work together on four goals within one of the themes of parish life mentioned above. All are aimed at making us the best parish we can be. This entire plan rests on the vision we proclaim that tells us why we exist as a parish: Divine Mercy is a welcoming community that inspires disciples to share God's love and transform the world.

It's a bold vision. It's big.

We have no desire to aspire to a small vision. A small vision will not take us where we want to go. And where we want to go is to be on mission with Jesus Christ. He himself is Good News for us and for the entire world.

We want to share that news with others. We want to *be* Good News for others. This five-year plan outlines how we will become that Good News, that welcoming community that inspires disciples to share God's love and transform the world.

As you read through the plan, there are some concepts you need to understand. These things explain the thinking that went into the plan. The concepts are -

- *Mission over Maintenance.* Early on, the Council adopted Father James Mallon's book *Divine Renovation* as a critical resource. The main point of his book is that the Catholic Church cannot continue to pursue business as usual. The very real and present-day threats of extreme individualism and secularism are eroding traditional forms of faith practice. That's true for every mainstream Christian community, Protestant and Catholic alike. It's also true for our Jewish brothers and sisters. Every house of worship continues to decline in membership because we have not adequately addressed the threats to us from the modern world. If we continue as a Church to maintain what is, we will in the long run end up smaller, weaker and even more ineffectual.
- *Conversion coupled with Catechesis.* For too long we have relied on teaching the tenets of the faith, or catechesis, as the main endeavor of faith formation. As far as it goes this endeavor is a fine one; catechesis is necessary. Faith does have a content. We can talk about it, explore it, explain it. The problem is that when our work with children and adults begins, continues and ends with catechesis you get what we've got now: young people, who after eight years of catechesis ending in Confirmation, part ways with the parish. For the most part, we no longer see them on Sundays. Catechesis only works for each of us when we first engage in conversion to Jesus Christ and then continue throughout our lives to deepen that conversion. You don't convert to Jesus through a textbook, a catechism or a course. You convert to Jesus by having a relationship with him and pursuing that relationship over the course of a lifetime as an intentional disciple. And how do you become a disciple? Through interaction with other disciples.
- *There Is No Silver Bullet.* It's not one thing or single "magic" silver bullet that will make us stronger and better in the face of secularism and individualism. It will require a whole bunch of initiatives, and those initiatives flow one into the other. Evangelization won't work without community; community doesn't mean anything without discipleship; discipleship doesn't have any effect without ministry; and ministry cannot achieve what it sets out to do without worship.

- *Step by Step.* While the plan is organized around five years and their corresponding themes, all five themes remain as elements of who we are as a parish in each year. Another way to say it: we'll be working on and relying on all five themes every year but in year one evangelization predominates, in year two community is the dominant theme, and so on. Just because we're focusing on evangelization in year one doesn't mean that worship stops. In improving who we are as a parish, we simply can't do everything at once.
- *Patience.* Change is not easy. This plan calls for change and renewal. It will take, at a minimum, the next five years to see some real growth. We know this from talking with other parishes who have pursued similar plans for change and renewal. We will need to be patient with each other and with the pace of change as we move forward. We will need to keep prayer at the forefront. We need to understand that over the next five years the Parish Council's main job will be to monitor our progress and adjust the plan accordingly, all the while keeping our parish vision front and center. Along with patience, we will need to cultivate the virtue of perseverance.
- *All Hands on Deck.* The plan will succeed as more and more parishioners commit to involvement. It will take the time and energy of many. It will take more than just staff involvement. In fact, if only staff works on the plan, the plan will not be effective. The expectation of the Parish Council is that many people will step forward and be involved. That involvement starts with Alpha. It is our chosen mechanism to jump start conversion and intentional discipleship. It's the first step in a journey of many more steps. As you read this, already more than 160 individuals have gone through Alpha at Divine Mercy Parish. If you are one of those who have done so, expect to be asked to get involved in one way or another to renew and revitalize our parish. Don't worry. Your involvement won't be as a "lone ranger." We'll be working together to effect renewal and growth. Many hands will lighten the tasks as we step forward together.

The Holy Spirit has been leading us to this moment. We are in this time and place for a reason. As the Popes over the past 50 years have expressed uniformly, we must go forth and proclaim the Gospel in new ways. It is an imperative of our personal journey as Catholics.

God is calling us to renew the Church for our children and their children, to commit fresh energy to Christ's call, the same call he gave to St. Francis of Assisi 800 years ago, "Go and rebuild my Church." In every age, Christ renews his Church and he will do so again through us. It's our turn.

F. Sta



Divine Mercy Parish is a welcoming community that inspires disciples of Jesus to share God's love and transform the world.

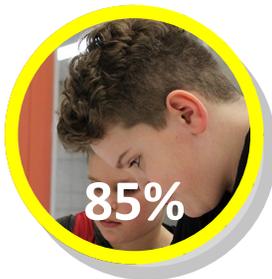


OPPORTUNITY BECKONS

Since we were constituted as Divine Mercy Parish in July of 2018, and even long before, as the former parishes of Sacred Heart and St. Philip the Apostle, we have been a place of generosity, welcome, transformation, hope, enthusiasm and dreams. These strengths will serve us well as we answer God’s call to renew his Church.

In spite of the opportunities presented to us by the Holy Spirit, we know the signs of the times. Change is everywhere: in our nation, our neighborhoods and even our own families. Technology, careers, politics, morals and outlooks on reality are rapidly changing, especially among young people. The fastest-growing religious affiliation in our country is “none,” people who claim “none” for their affiliation. Nearly 40% of people under the age of 35 claim no faith at all. This is true across the board for all major religions—Catholic, Protestant and Jewish. And we don’t yet fully understand how COVID has impacted the Church.

NATIONAL STUDIES SHOW:



85 % of 8th graders **stop practicing** the faith by age 23.



83% of Catholic Millennials **do not attend Mass weekly.**



52% of those raised Catholic have **left the Church** at some point.

IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO, DATA REVEALS:



Mass attendance has declined 35% since the year 2000.



Baptisms have declined 40% in the past 10 years.



Weddings are down 33% in the last 10 years (down 58.5% since 2000).



Vocations to the Priesthood have declined 43% in the past 10 years. Only 2 priests were ordained in May 2022.

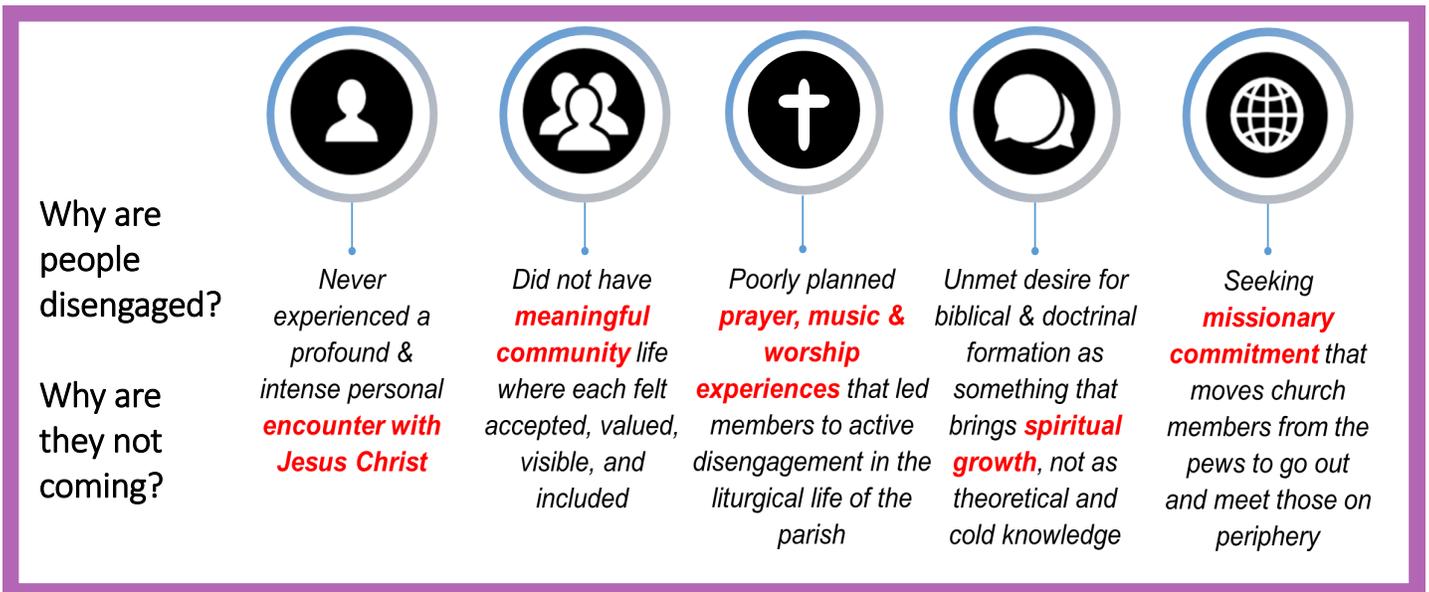
IN OUR OWN PARISH:

- We have celebrated dozens of Baptisms, First Communions and Confirmations in the last several years, yet the young people receiving those sacraments (and their families) were not always connected with the parish or even in an intentional relationship with Jesus.
- Many parishioners have grieved as their adult children have left the faith.
- Most registered parishioners no longer worship with us regularly, and the pandemic increased those numbers.
- Our ministries are burdened with a lack of new volunteers and leaders.
- Some new parishioners have found it difficult to get connected.
- The cost of operating the parish has begun to outpace the rate of giving by parishioners.
- Mass attendance and parish community are no longer priorities for most people.

This is why the time is right for renewal. Revitalization and renewal are possible with the help of the Holy Spirit and the willingness of parishioners to be open to change.

The time is right because it's time to respond to the great commission of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Mt 28:19-20). We know that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. We need to live out that belief and share that belief with others.

What we know:



GROWTH AND PRUNING

We know God is at work among us and that our future is bright. We have begun to plant seeds which will lead to greater growth. Signs of hope are clear.

- We formed the **Senior Leadership Team**, which quickly went to work to envision a future for Divine Mercy Parish. They initially crafted our parish vision statement. Their work was further refined by the Parish Council which tweaked, ratified and adopted the final version. This vision is clear and simple, yet profound. It points the way for us, providing our renewal efforts with a singular direction. It gives us the mission of sharing God's love, and through that love, transforming the world. It calls us to be missionary disciples. It's a big vision, one worthy of our efforts. It's challenging. We are assured, however, that with God, all things are possible.
- We launched **Alpha**. We are currently hosting our 9th *Alpha* course, and see no signs of stopping. We successfully ran Alpha during the pandemic as well. **Alpha has produced tangible fruit.** For example, small faith sharing groups now meet regularly. Eucharistic Adoration began at Sacred Heart Church, and was reestablished at St. Philip the Apostle Church. An online Rosary group was created which gathers each weekday morning; another Rosary group meets regularly in-person with families and young kids praying before Sunday Mass. Our hospitality ministry is growing, slowly but surely, as more parishioners participate in monthly socials after Mass. We instituted Name Tag Sunday so parishioners could get to know each other's names. We recruited Greeters and Ushers, a small but dedicated cadre, who welcome Sunday worshippers. And all of these groups will grow with the help of the Holy Spirit and intentional prayer. Prayer makes a difference.
- Our **Children's Ministry** program continues to evolve and innovate. Children and families experience the joys of getting to know Jesus, sharing their faith and serving others while learning about the teachings of Jesus. We want our children to truly *know* Jesus, versus knowing *about* Jesus. Our goal is to change hearts so that young people are connected to Christ and remain vigorous young disciples of Jesus.
- We followed Pope Francis' call to recapture a missionary identity, to serve the lost and the least through our many **outreach efforts**. Our newest efforts include: Be a Hunger Hero, which fights hunger locally through the New Trier and Northfield Township Food Pantries and Uncle Pete's Ministry sack dinners which are provided to A Just Harvest. In addition, we have continued to build our relationship with our two sharing parishes on Chicago's south side (St. Moses the Black and St. Benedict the African), with a focus on creating activities that bring us together, rather than Divine Mercy simply helping to support them financially.

These signs of hope indicate growth, and yet, we realize that the Gospel challenges us to prune away that which is no longer a help to our growth as a parish. As the Parish Council began its discussions on the strategic plan, every single aspect of parish life and ministry was examined. We asked ourselves, "What is currently producing fruit and what isn't?" The discussion was not aimless. Our starting point for evaluation was Father James Mallon's book *Divine Renovation*.

A PRAYERFUL CONVERSATION

After spending time with Father Mallon's provocative resource, the Council used *Divine Renovation Guidebook: A Step-by-Step Manual for Transforming Your Parish*, also written by Father James Mallon. The process outlined in that manual included assessing the current state of our weekend experience (Sunday Masses), hospitality, music, homilies, the feeling of community within the parish, the various ministries in which people could be engaged, whether and how small communities within the parish community operated, and the experience of the Holy Spirit among parishioners.

After this initial assessment, which included reviews of the Member Engagement Survey (ME 25) from February 2020 in which parishioners rated how the parish assists in their spiritual development, the Council engaged in a lengthy discussion around five key areas or themes which define every Catholic parish: worship (liturgy), evangelization (sharing Good News), discipleship (following Jesus), community and ministry (service and outreach). The Council ultimately came to a consensus defining our

aspirations for each of these five areas or themes. In other words, we articulated where we want to be with regard to worship, evangelization, discipleship, community and ministry.

After this lengthy conversation, the Council moved on to evaluate the current state of each of these areas at Divine Mercy. This SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) took months to complete. This analysis led to an initial version of the strategic plan which was further refined and expanded to include four major goals we wish to achieve within each area or theme. The goals are concrete and measurable, so the Parish Council can continue to monitor the progress of the strategic plan, and have a basis exists for evaluating its effectiveness. In addition, the Parish Council will assess the spirituality of the plan by retaking the ME25 every few years.

God has gifted us with so much, and as we know from Luke 12:48, to whom much is given, much will be expected. We know he expects great things from our parish. This strategic plan is designed to provide a roadmap to help our vision come to life. It will help us as we continue to follow God’s call to reach out to the lost and the least. This plan is meant for:

The Pastor: to set direction for the parish and provide guidance to decisions made across the parish and within the staff based on the priorities established in the plan;

The Senior Leadership Team: to develop processes, initiatives and structures that help bring the plan to fruition;

The Parish Council: to develop high-level objectives and measurements that help achieve our vision; to periodically evaluate and assess the effectiveness of the plan and to revise it accordingly;

The Parish Finance Council: to understand what initiatives and strategies are in place that need to be funded according to established priorities;

Staff: to understand how their daily jobs and interactions, as well as parish-wide projects, directly relate to moving the vision forward;

Parishioners: to raise awareness of our call to be missionary disciples and how we as a parish are embracing that call spiritually by what we each say and do.

<p>"We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship." Dorothy Day</p>	<p>He waits for us every day, in the laboratory, in the operating theatre (room), in the army barracks, in the university chair, in the factory, in the workshop, in the fields, in the home and in all the immense panorama of work. Saint Josemaría Escrivá</p> <p>I am happier relieving a neighbor than I am raptured in prayer. Because when I am at prayer God assists me. But in relieving a neighbor, I assist God. Saint Maria Magdalene de Pazzi</p> <p>Sanctify yourself and you will sanctify society. Saint Francis of Assisi</p>	<p>Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me, Christ below me, Christ above me, Christ at my right, Christ at my left, Christ in lying down, Christ in sitting, Christ in rising up, Christ in the heart of everyone who speak to me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me. Saint Patrick of Ireland</p>
--	---	---

PRIORITIES OF THE FIVE-YEAR PLAN

We have prioritized our focus for the next five years in 12-18 month increments in the following order. Each of these priorities has equal weight but in each of the five years of the plan, that particular priority along with that priority's goals predominate.

Sharing Good News / Evangelization: Divine Mercy Parish aspires to be a people who evangelize, who share the Good News of Jesus Christ. Parishioners will learn how to comfortably share how Jesus enriches their lives and to invite and welcome others to come to their own encounter with the Lord.

Sharing Good News: Evangelization Goals (Year One):

- Increase Alpha completion among Divine Mercy parishioners (400 new participants).
- Help participants identify and share their own story of Jesus (50 testimony instances).
- Promote why the “Good News” is good.
- Engage post-Alpha participants in faith sharing and community experiences (50% Alpha participants).

Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence.
1 Peter 3:15-16a.]



Community: Divine Mercy Parish aspires to be a community that is abundantly gracious, hospitable and respectful of one another. Our welcoming practices will continually attract others to us. When seekers or new parishioners come to our parish, they will see Christ at work in us by our inclusiveness, where no one is left on the fringes and where healing and reconciliation draw all people to join us.

Community Goals (Year Two):

- Grow and expand existing Welcome Ministry (100 members).
- Establish combined Northshore Tri-parish youth ministry (100 combined Middle and High School participants).
- Develop forum for listening to real and relevant needs, including research into what's relevant via annual Town Hall session.
- Build “shallow entry” points into community for Catholics and guests (6-12 events annually).

Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.
Romans 12:4-5



Following Jesus / Discipleship: Divine Mercy Parish aspires to be filled with people committed to a lifelong intentional relationship with Jesus Christ. Through this relationship their lives will have been transformed so that Jesus is the center of their lives. Love of neighbor and good works will flow abundantly from them. There will be supportive opportunities and encouragement to meet others who are on the journey of discipleship.

Following Jesus: Discipleship Goals (Year Three):

- Create small groups to actively engage/witness and share faith in Jesus (500 participants).
- Build a discipleship pathway.
- Expand sacramental formation and preparation to address the whole person (75% of Confirmandi actively involved).
- Encourage school/children’s ministry parents to attend Alpha (50% school/RE parents complete Alpha).

Then Jesus approached and said to them, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations.”
 Mathew 28:18-19a



Service and Outreach / Ministry: Divine Mercy Parish aspires to serve the needs of others and of the parish in the name of Jesus by inviting all to take part in service and outreach. Engaging in mission opportunities will move our compassion and care outward.

Service and Outreach: Ministry Goals (Year Four):

- Publicize the value of service (6 bimonthly testimonials).
- Create opportunities for ministry ownership and participation, incorporating families where possible.
- Provide opportunities for volunteers to reflect on and share impact of service experiences (quarterly sharing mechanism, annual ministry sharing/reflection events).
- Establish mission trip opportunities among Northshore Parish grouping (one outreach event annually).

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the holy Spirit; whoever serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by others.
 Romans 14:17-18



Worship: Divine Mercy Parish aspires to gather enthusiastically as the body of Christ for active and Spirit-filled liturgies and devotions, putting a human face on the divine love and mercy of God. We will intercede for each other and for the needs of the world. Our worship will inspire us to go forth to do God's work.

Worship Goals (Year Five):

- Evaluate the feasibility and potential benefit of incorporating infant Baptisms and First Eucharist celebrations into the regular Mass schedule.
- Explore creative and diverse approaches to music at Mass that engage different musical preferences (different Mass themes).
- Incorporate creative/innovative approach to homily preparation and preaching (content team, 25% increase in lay reflections).
- Develop deeper understanding of parishioner role at Mass (annual teaching Mass).

*Be filled with the Spirit,
addressing one another in
psalms and hymns and
spiritual songs, singing and
playing to the Lord in your
hearts, giving thanks always
and for everything in the name
of our Lord Jesus Christ to God
the Father.
Ephesians 5:18b-20*



CONCLUSION

In sum, while our focus each year is on one particular area, we will still continue the great work we've already begun across our parish. These priorities help frame how we make decisions and what additional work might be required beyond the specific goals we choose to undertake in light of the priority for each year.

The order of priorities reflects our intent to build on each year's successes while introducing concepts that expand and solidify the themes not yet addressed. As each year's success is reviewed, the Parish Council will evaluate the relevance and timeliness of the following years' planned priorities, adjusting as necessary.

The Parish Council has spent over 1,200 'man' hours formulating this plan. For the last twenty-two months, our mission has been to pray, discuss, listen, debate and discern the future of this parish. In these discussions, certain key principles and values became apparent to the members. We'd like to share these principles and values with you. They are:

We cherish relationships.

Our Creator God is characterized by relationship, for God is Trinitarian: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We believe that we thrive because of relationships. Relationship schools our faith. We believe that the interior life develops best when a person also prays and shares faith with others.

We cultivate gratitude.

God blesses us in a multitude of ways. We never tire of saying "thank you" to God and to others. We choose positivity and the effects that come from affirming one another. We believe life is made better with an attitude of gratitude.

We spread joy.

We revel in the Gospel for it is truly Good News. We believe that the more we radiate the joy of the Gospel by love, inclusivity and acceptance of others, the more we will grow as a household of the faithful.

We seek heaven.

Travelers seek guidance from the North Star. As pilgrims journeying to our eternal home, we look to the "north star" of the kingdom of heaven. We believe that while we are engaged in the concrete and the worldly, our hearts are firmly fixed on the eternal realities revealed by Jesus and his Church.

We believe that with these principles and values in mind, we can't go wrong. We will get to where God wants us to be as a parish. As the plan unfolds and as it is evaluated and refined each year, we will see the fruits of the Spirit at work among us. God willing, by June of 2027 we will see...

- 400 new participants who have experienced an Alpha course
- 50% of Alpha participants participating in faith sharing and community experiences
- Parishioners sharing their own stories of Jesus and promoting the Good News and influencing others
- Our Welcoming ministry increased by 100 members
- A Northshore Tri-Parish Youth Ministry formed with 100 combined Middle and High School participants
- Annual Town Hall events where real and relevant parishioner needs are surfaced
- 6-12 shallow entry points into community have been created annually for Catholics and guests
- 500 participants will be part of small groups that engage/witness and share faith in Jesus
- A discipleship pathway will be in place
- 50% of school and Children's Ministry parents have completed Alpha
- Sacramental preparation from the whole person and 75% of our Confirmandi are actively involved in the Parish
- Six testimonials a year on the value of service will be shared
- Family ministry opportunities created
- Annual service reflection opportunities have been created, along with a quarterly sharing mechanism
- Annual Northshore Tri-Parish outreach Mission trips will be established that include families and/or solely youth
- 50% of Infant Baptisms and First Eucharist celebrations will take place at weekend Masses

- Weekend Masses have adopted a creative and diverse approach to music
- Lay people will be offering reflections 25% of the time, and a creative content team has been created for homily preparation
- An annual teaching Mass will take place to develop a deeper understanding of the parishioner role at Mass.

We know the Holy Spirit has bold plans for Divine Mercy Parish! We have been gifted with the resources and people we need to accomplish his plans, even when we transition to a new pastor in 2024. We are confident in our approach, our plan and our future. We ask for your prayers as we spread the good news of Christ, build intentional disciples, bring them into service for God’s kingdom, strengthen our Christian community of believers, and worship the Lord Jesus together.

The road ahead is challenging but exciting. We invite you to join us in this exciting endeavor as Divine Mercy Parish pursues growth and revitalization with an emphasis on evangelization, community, discipleship, ministry and worship.

God himself assures us, “Behold, I make all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

*“Behold, I make all things new.”
Revelation 21:5*

EPILOGUE

This document is the result of the prayers and the work of parish leadership, staff and volunteers throughout our parish. It is the culmination of efforts by the Parish Council, to whom we are indebted for their wisdom, insight, and vision.

Special thanks to Missy Grant of St. Ann’s Church in Coppell, Texas, whose facilitation and guidance was instrumental in the crafting of this strategic plan, and more importantly, and who helped guide us in our role as missionary disciples.

This document was crafted with significant input from key staff and the Senior Leadership Team. It was prepared by Father Steven Lanza and Judy Pyke, and approved by the Parish Council.

Parish Council

Fr. Steve Lanza, Pastor

Kathleen Clarke, Chair

Tom Borders

Dona Carroll

Jim Dietz

Sam Fifer

Liz Harvey

Judy Pyke

Patty Sanfilippo

Susan Seeberg

Cathy Stegich

Michelle Wasielewski

...and many thanks to Lisa Centner and Maureen Valvassori, who left the Council before completion of the Plan.