

**Community Discernment and Planning Feedback Summary
for the West Burlington Grouping
Submitted to the
Renew My Church Standards and Recommendations Commission**

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OVERVIEW

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Renew My Church efforts over these past three months. We represent the parishes of St. Cletus, St. Francis Xavier, and St. John of the Cross. This report summarizes the feedback from each of our parish communities and includes discussions with our grouping members and our writing team regarding our feedback on our focus on discernment, discipleship, and missionary discipleship. We submit this report for your prayerful consideration of our feedback as you discern the recommendation for the Presbyteral Council and Cardinal Cupich. We prayerfully await feedback and input from Cardinal Cupich as we move forward in our parishes toward the vision of Renew My Church to make missionary disciples, build community, and inspire witness.

ST. CLETUS PARISH

St. Cletus Parish incorporates the southern half of LaGrange between 47th St. and 79th St., and generally between Wolf Road and the railroad tracks on the east side. While geographically large for Chicago (approximately 10 square miles), much of the property included in the parish is not residential, consisting mostly of small factories and retail. The parish was established in 1951 to accommodate post-war suburban growth in LaGrange and Western Springs. Currently, we have approximately 2500 registered families. We remain well-resourced and well-attended, with a strong school and strong outreach to the LaGrange community.

As part of the Renew My Church process, we held an in-person parish conversation and asked our parishioners about the strengths and weaknesses of the parish. This was advertised in the bulletin, and we established an email box to which stakeholders could send their thoughts. Some people did take advantage of this opportunity to email us.

Our Strengths:

Uniformly, people cited our energetic and enthusiastic parishioners, who are willing to take on all kinds of challenges. Our physical plant is in relatively good shape, and we have a new Parish Center with offices, a big conference room and a dedicated gym (which the school and intramural leagues regularly use). We just retired the debt on this building. Coming out of the pandemic, we have revived a strong, vibrant, active, and dedicated Parish Finance Council, which meets monthly. Our Hispanic Ministry is strong; we have a weekly Mass in Spanish and are trying to institute more bilingual prayer events. Six members of our staff, including both the pastor and the associate pastor, are bilingual in Spanish and English. Our school is strong and well-supported by the parish. We have a thriving religious education program and a large RCIA process. Earlier this year we confirmed over 100 candidates, including adults. We had a large number of baptisms, an above-average number of weddings, and, sadly, an above-average number of funerals. We are sure that as we come out of the pandemic these sacramental numbers will shift slightly. We already have 13 weddings on our books (50% increase over last year) and our baptism classes are full.

Our Opportunities:

St. Cletus suffers from the same cultural problems that many parishes face in 2022—we lost a lot of attendance during the pandemic, and young single people and younger families do not attend church as often as they might have ten or twenty years ago. We believe we have also lost a lot of younger people because of things out of our control—divisions in the church, the church's attitude toward the LGBTQ community, political divides in the US, etc. We as a parish try to be welcoming and hospitable to all, but the institutional church is perceived as negative and inflexible, and some people do not see an advantage to belonging. That said, we had a much greater turnout for Ash Wednesday than we expected. Our pastor distributed ashes at the LaGrange village center to staff and police and firefighters, and we visited several facilities and individuals to distribute ashes. The people we visited seemed to really appreciate this.

We also find opportunities in that a significant percentage of the parish staff, including the pastor, is new in the last year, bringing new energy and new ideas. Our pastor places great emphasis on being present to parishioners and being transparent with them. They are responding positively to this. As we come out of Covid, we plan to provide more adult formation opportunities and to reach out into the community, as well as collaborate with the other parishes in our cluster to provide ministries at scale (larger and better confirmation retreats, speaker series, common missions with nationally-known speakers, etc.). We had a number of good suggestions for formation from the parish conversations.

Our social concerns ministry is very strong, overseen by a paid minister. We are especially proud of a large and well-supplied food pantry that services both our parishioners and the community at large. Our food pantry recently moved into a larger space on the campus, and we have attracted a substantial matching grant as we fundraise for our food pantry operations. Our parish conversation surfaced a number of suggestions for social concerns activities, including a blood drive, community service day, recycling, etc.

Our Challenges:

We lost one of our associate pastors and our liturgy assistant this year. This stretches our professional pastoral staff (although we have hired a pastoral associate), and we will need to turn to recruiting volunteers to cover some of our ministries. Our current cadre of volunteers remains enthusiastic, but we need to be careful not to burn them out. We feel that potential volunteers are definitely there, but we need to tell them what they can do. Another recent challenge was the discovery of a substantial debt to the Archdiocese remaining from the “To Teach Who Christ Is” campaign. Between the pandemic and the turnover in staff, the existence of this debt was not immediately front and center for us. We have been transparent with the community about this and are making efforts to reduce it as quickly as possible.

Parishioners pointed out that at the moment they feel our Hispanic community and the English-speaking community are almost two separate parishes. We are instituting some bilingual services now and making an effort to bring the communities together more often.

Some interesting suggestions came from our parish conversation:

- Opportunities for parishioners to get together offsite
- Children's Liturgies and Teen Masses
- Some people requested opportunities for Adoration
- Adult formation activities: Bible Study, speakers, etc.
- More hospitality of the coffee-and-donuts variety
- More communication between parish organizations to avoid duplication of efforts

Many of these suggestions are already on our radar, and we will be implementing them as we come out of the pandemic and as we have time and personnel to do so. We were gratified by a decent-sized turnout of thoughtful parishioners at our parish conversation meeting, and a much bigger-than-expected turnout at our liturgies on Ash Wednesday.

We look forward to opportunities for collaboration with St. John of the Cross and St. Francis Xavier for formation and other events.

ST. FRANCIS XAVIER PARISH

St Francis Xavier Parish, founded in 1890, is a vibrant parish in the western suburbs, including LaGrange (north of 47th street) and LaGrange Park. The parish, comprising about 3200 households, has a strong, family-focused mission, with many multi-generation families supporting both the parish and the 460-student parish elementary school. Much of the parish's social activities, service opportunities and faith formation revolve around this family-centric community where we pray, we learn, and we serve. Below we will touch on the strengths which we hope to grow as well as the challenges that we plan to address.

Our Strengths:

- The staff includes a pastor and associate pastor, who are supported by several regular sacramental ministers to preside over five weekend Masses and a daily Mass on all but Thursdays when a morning rosary prayer session is held. The parish values liturgy, investing in a strong music ministry that includes a wide range of liturgical music, ranging from traditional and contemporary hymns and parish choirs to a lively guitar and spirit choir Mass on Sunday evenings.
- The staff includes a pastoral associate who focuses on adult faith formation, spirituality, and evangelization. SFX is also blessed to have two senior deacons who participate in liturgies.
- The parish supports a thriving Preschool 3 through 8th grade elementary school, which has twice been named a National Blue Ribbon School; the SFX religious education program enrolls 550 children in kindergarten through 8th grade. Sacraments are celebrated in a big way as parents prioritize these threshold moments, which bring them to church and include family involvement. In 2021, the parish celebrated 122 baptisms, over 120 first communions and over 100 confirmations.
- Service and community outreach is a big priority in the parish, which hosts a weekly food pantry, servicing about 80 food insecure households weekly; this ministry operated without interruption during the pandemic. In addition, both the parish elementary school and the parish host regular service events, including an all-school service day on the feast of St Francis Xavier at the parish elementary school and a parish wide event in early June. Regular support of our sister parish, St Agatha's, continues. SFX also participates in ecumenical partner activities in the community.
- The buildings and structures are in good standing and are maintained on a regular basis. Parishioners take pride in the church environment, witnessed by the volunteers who adorn the inside for the liturgical seasons and help maintain outdoor gardens.

Our Challenges and Opportunities:

- **Hospitality:** SFX wants to be a welcoming community, and many long-time parishioners feel very at home in the parish. However, we have some room to grow in reaching out to newcomers and others who have had a hard time breaking into a tight knit community. Following are some opportunities to create a more hospitable environment:
 - A return to coffee and donuts after Masses.
 - Offering more social events to get to know parishioners, welcome newcomers and become better acquainted with the parish staff and leadership.
 - Recruit more ministers to staff an excellent new parishioner welcome program.
 - Implement a follow-up program for families after baptism to promote parishioner engagement.
 - Unify the parish elementary school and religious ed families, in part by offering combined faith formation programming. Very little faith formation is offered to parents and family units in either program, which is an opportunity to bring both groups together to share faith and fellowship.
- **Adult Faith Formation:** People in this parish are hungry for faith formation that meets them where they are—in their marriage, in their families, around their work schedule, and in groups where they can get to know others and dive deeper in their faith. They want to see lots of creative, *relevant* ways of reflecting on faith and life together while growing spiritually. The following are opportunities for future programming to invite parishioner engagement:
 - Marriage enrichment programs.
 - New family programs with childcare provided - programming for new parents and their children as well as adoptive family opportunities.
 - Lunchtime faith-based options to reach professionals working remotely from home.
 - Restored senior programs and events to address retired parishioners.
 - Programs addressing empty nest couples.
 - Building and expanding upon the current offerings of an annual women's retreat, men's social events, Lenten programs, and scripture study.
- **Youth Ministry:** The lack of a youth minister for the past three years has led to minimal outreach to high school youth. For the following reasons, more energy and resources need to be allocated for Youth Ministry.
 - Teens need a youth minister so that they can be engaged.
 - Parents need to know someone is working hard at engaging their teens during these formative years when teens are interested in adult mentorship outside of their home setting.
 - The current parent youth ministry advisory board is not a sustainable sole solution for a vibrant parish youth ministry.
- **Service:** SFX parishioners are eager to serve, with preferential focus on the poor and marginalized in and around Chicago as well as to some far-reaching communities. The following are opportunities to improve and expand these programs.
 - Expanding possible service opportunities to parishioners and parish families, with better communication promoting increased participation.
 - Expanding the current Peace and Justice committee, to address current issues, including race relations, environmental topics, and other social concerns.

- Programming focused on Catholic Social Teaching.
- Breathing new life into the SPRED (Special Religious Education for Persons with Disabilities) programming, meeting the particular needs of these individuals.

Being a follower of Christ is a seven-day a week commitment; but many Catholics feel that fulfilling their obligation to attend Mass is sufficient. As disciples, we are tasked to build the Kingdom of God here on earth – this can't be done in one day. Our hope is that implementing new opportunities to deepen their faith and relationships with Jesus and others and inviting people into the life of the church by meeting them in their everyday lives just as Jesus did, will strengthen our parish community. Of course, it only begins there; we look forward to collaborating with our neighboring parishes, sharing resources and ideas to improve parish life all around, and impacting the larger community with the gospel message.

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS PARISH

St. John of the Cross parish encompasses the villages of Western Springs, Burr Ridge, and Indian Head Park. Our parish was established in 1960 and continues to be the spiritual center for Western Springs and neighboring communities today. As we contemplate the future of our parish, we have identified some of our core strengths that we feel we can build on to make our parish even stronger. Realizing our challenges going forward, we strongly believe that we can grow in the years to come.

Our Key Strengths:

- We are a large parish, with nearly 4,000 families in our directory, we have a large target audience to engage and help grow their relationship with Jesus.
- With Significant financial reserves and a balanced budget, we are fortunate to have the necessary resources to support our mission. In addition, we have well maintained facilities, a facility plan to keep current on maintenance, and dedicated staff to keep the parish facilities in top shape.
- With over 635 Pre- K – 8 students enrolled in our parish school, committed staff/administration, and engaged/supportive families, we are proud of our twice winning Blue Ribbon parish school. Additionally, we have a robust YC program which offers catechesis for over 500 parish families as they grow their relationship with Christ.
- Our longstanding support of vocations and seminarians is a continued demonstration of the strength of the parish.
- We have a wide variety of dedicated ministries that serve across the full spectrum of age. Such as: Women's club, teen program, Men's Club, Outreach, Bible study, bereavement, etc.
- Despite sharp drops in weekly Mass attendance the number of Baptisms, First Communions, and Confirmations has held steady.
- What started as a celebration of our Parish' 50th anniversary has matured into the single largest fundraiser and community event at the Parish. The SJC Fest has become not only an annual gathering event of parishioners but will welcome thousands from the community at large.
- In addition to their dedication to the parish, our parishioners are key to the strong outreach programs which have been developed over the years. With dedicated parish staff and a solid group of volunteers we are able to serve Jesus and connect with those in need. These include: Kolbe House, Food Pantry collections, Share Christmas, Precious Blood Ministries and Port Ministries.
- Despite the decline in Sunday Mass attendance, we are pleased with the Daily Mass attendance as it is growing.

- As music is integral to our services, we are truly blessed to have a robust music ministry with dedicated parish staff, multiple choirs, and talented cantors, musicians, and singers.
- Established opportunities for adult exploration and formation.

Our Challenges:

- Like all other parishes we have experienced a steep decline in Mass attendance. This has accelerated with the Pandemic and is one of our primary challenges.
- The decline in the number of Archdiocesan priests is a continued challenge for us. A parish of our size requires many hands of support. This has been mitigated through various efforts, but the lack of staffing wears on our pastor.
- While we have many active ministries, we are challenged by the concentration of participation in a relatively small group of volunteers. We would love to grow the number of parishioners in leadership roles.
- Sunday is no longer a family day. We are competing with sports and other activities as we draw people to the events of the parish. Furthermore, we are facing a shift in culture away from the church.
- The habit of coming to Sunday Mass or participating in other key events has been broken by the pandemic. We need to recreate the habit of participation by encouraging people to gather once again as a community.
- Our Men's club has struggled for years with participation. A small, dedicated group has kept it alive; we need to re-imagine the Men's club.

Our Opportunities:

- Re-opening post pandemic will be a huge opportunity for the Parish. We eagerly await upcoming in person events.
- We need to increase parish school and YC family engagement with the overall parish. Although they are engaged with their children's programs, we need to broaden their involvement.
- We need to leverage technology in creative ways. We are excited for the opportunity to introduce new tools and apps, while benefiting from the streaming capabilities we now have.
- As mentioned earlier, we have experienced a steady number of youth sacraments. We need to better engage the parents of these children.
- We need to identify opportunities related to the scheduling and communication of parish activities.

Mutual Support Opportunities

Currently, we three parishes work together to serve the people in this area in many ways. We have a collaborative model for RCIA, adult Confirmation, youth-centered mission trips and Kairos retreats, Divorce and Beyond ministry, and grief support (Seasons of Hope). In addition, we work together on collaborative programming for Respect Life and Domestic Violence Awareness. We also coordinate prayer opportunities open to all and reconciliation services so as not to compete with one another. We also coordinate our Mass schedules, particularly for Holy Days and Daily.

As we look to the future, we three parishes identified other opportunities to work together. These include:

- Large adult formation events, for example shared mission, shared speaker-series.
- Large youth formation and social events; a tri-parish Confirmation retreat event is in the works.

- Elementary school collaborations.
- Perhaps offering an “open house” at all three buildings on the same day with hospitality at each site, to introduce all to the three campuses.
- Coordinated Holy Hour is in process.

Structural Considerations

Due to the size and stability of all three of these parishes, there are no structural considerations.