

PARTNERS IN THE GOSPEL

A LETTER FROM ARCHBISHOP PAUL D. ETIENNE TO THE PRIESTS AND PEOPLE OF THE CHURCH IN WESTERN WASHINGTON

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

*I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you,
praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you,
because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now.*

(Philippians 1:3-5)

When St. Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians centuries ago, he began with a word of thanks. I wish to begin this letter with a word of thanks and an assurance of my prayers for all of you. As your Archbishop, I am endlessly amazed by — and profoundly grateful for — the witness you give to Jesus Christ in this beautiful part of God's creation. I am grateful for the lay leaders in our parishes, schools, Chancery offices and ministries, and Catholic Community Services and Catholic Housing Services for their dedicated service in the name of Christ. I am grateful to our deacons and religious for the many ways they have answered the call to serve God's people. And I am grateful to our priests, to whom I can only say: Thank you for all the ways you witness to Christ in the world and for the loving service you give to God's holy people. Thank you for your partnership in the Gospel.

We are *all* partners in the Gospel. And why does this matter? The Gospel shares the life of Jesus and is the foundation of our faith and understanding of Jesus' teachings. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus speaks to us

saying, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This is known as the Great Commission and is ultimately why the Church exists today.

The proclamation of the Kingdom of God is not a task we do alone, nor is it a responsibility reserved to the ordained. All the baptized are called

to do this holy work together, as one body — the Body of Christ — and whatever affects one, affects us all.

In these pages, I wish to reflect with you on some of the challenges we face

"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Matthew 28:19

today in our local Church, how we will meet these challenges together, and how, as partners in the Gospel, we can build up healthy and vibrant parish communities.

READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World of the Second Vatican Council, we read: "In every age, the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (4). It is our responsibility not





Encounter Jesus Christ

only to be aware of what is happening around us, but also to read and interpret those signs in the light of the Gospel. In other words, we are called to see, to judge and to act.

What are the signs of our times that we need to see and respond to? In the last 10 years, we have witnessed significant shifts in religious practice in our region. Between 2010 and 2019, there has been a substantial drop in Mass attendance across the Archdiocese. Participation in the sacraments is down as well — 30% fewer baptisms and 18% fewer Catholic weddings, to cite just two examples. Fewer people at Mass means that some of our parishes are struggling financially. These statistics predate the COVID-19 epidemic, which drastically exacerbated these trends.

At the same time, there is a continuing decline in the numbers of seminarians and priests. Today, we have a vibrant Vocations Office with many offerings for vocational

discernment. We also have a wonderful cadre of young men preparing to serve the people of the Archdiocese of Seattle as priests. But we cannot ignore the fact that we have about half as many seminarians today as we did even 10 years ago. And our priests are aging. We anticipate that by 2036, we will have only about 60 pastors serving our local Church. The trends we are seeing are not unique to the Archdiocese of Seattle; they are echoed in many dioceses across the United States, Canada and other parts of the world.

Of course, statistics do not present a full picture of life and vitality in our local Church. Wonderful things are happening, with God's grace, every day. Nevertheless, we would be failing in our call to "read the signs of the times" if we simply ignored the trends, made light of the dramatic changes we are witnessing and kept on doing what we have always done. The status quo is no longer an option. The realities of our situation call for a new response — indeed, for a re-envisioning of parish life.

RE-ENVISIONING PARISH LEADERSHIP AND STRUCTURE

As we begin this restructuring process, we must always keep first and foremost our desire and our efforts to help our people grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. He is our life, our hope, our salvation. Strengthening the faith of our people and redoubling our efforts to advance the mission of the Church must always be our top priorities.

But what is the mission of the Church? This is a question that many

today cannot succinctly answer. For the past two years we have been praying and developing a deeper understanding of our mission. Ultimately, the mission of the Church is to:

- **Encounter Jesus Christ**
- **Accompany each other**
- **Live the joy of the Gospel**

Everything we do as Church is to help realize this mission.

However, we must carry out this mission within the present context. Partners in the Gospel is our response to the realities we face. It is a significant process of restructuring to maximize our existing pastoral leadership and provide a sustainable structure for the future. It will allow us to keep our parishes and schools vibrant and mission-focused.

Partners in the Gospel envisions that, beginning on July 1, 2024, most of our 174 locations (including parishes, missions and stations) will become part of a *family* with other parishes. Each family will be served by one pastor and one or more parochial vicars. The family groupings are being developed based on size, geography, cultural and ethnic makeup, financial health and school presence. The final configuration of the parish families will be the fruit of profound prayer, exhaustive work and study, and broad consultation.

For well over a year, the Archdiocese of Seattle has been collaborating with expert analysts from PartnersEdge, who worked with us to develop a draft configuration plan in consultation with the Presbyteral Council, the Partners Oversight Committee and the priests, deacons and lay leaders of the

Archdiocese. In September, the plan will enter the most important phase of the consultation process, when it is presented to the faithful of the Archdiocese for input.

I urge all the faithful to participate prayerfully in this consultation process. We want to hear from you. Not only that, we *need* to hear from you. Your knowledge of and love for your own parish community makes your input into the proposed family structures invaluable. Pope Francis has called us to be a more synodal Church — that is, a listening Church, a Church that journeys together. Please participate in the listening sessions and consultations in your parish community, whether in person or online. Please share your wisdom and experience and be part of this journey.

BECOMING A FAMILY

After the consultation process is completed, the final parish family configurations will be announced in early 2024, and the announcement of priest pastoral assignments will follow in spring 2024. The families will become a reality on July 1, 2024. The pastor, the parish staff, parish leadership and parishioners will then work together over about three years to discern how to become one faith family, given their own unique situations, needs, challenges and gifts.

This process will take time — and we will not rush it. In the first year, the focus will be on getting to know the people and the cultures of each parish community, finding opportunities to meet each other, and coming to understand the unique gifts we bring to the family.

Later in the process, parishes in the family will begin actively looking for ways to collaborate with each other and share ministries that overlap. Families will grow together and begin to see themselves as one parish, striving to encounter Jesus, accompany one another on the journey of faith and live the joy of the Gospel in the world. Then, in the final year, the family will create a “One Parish” plan for becoming one canonical parish.

What does it mean to become one canonical parish? It means that even when there are several church buildings, many administrative operations are centralized. For example, one finance council will serve the entire faith family. Other important functions of the parish, like faith formation, might also be shared. This reality will look somewhat different

in each parish family. By July 1, 2027, most faith families will be ready to come together as one canonical parish.

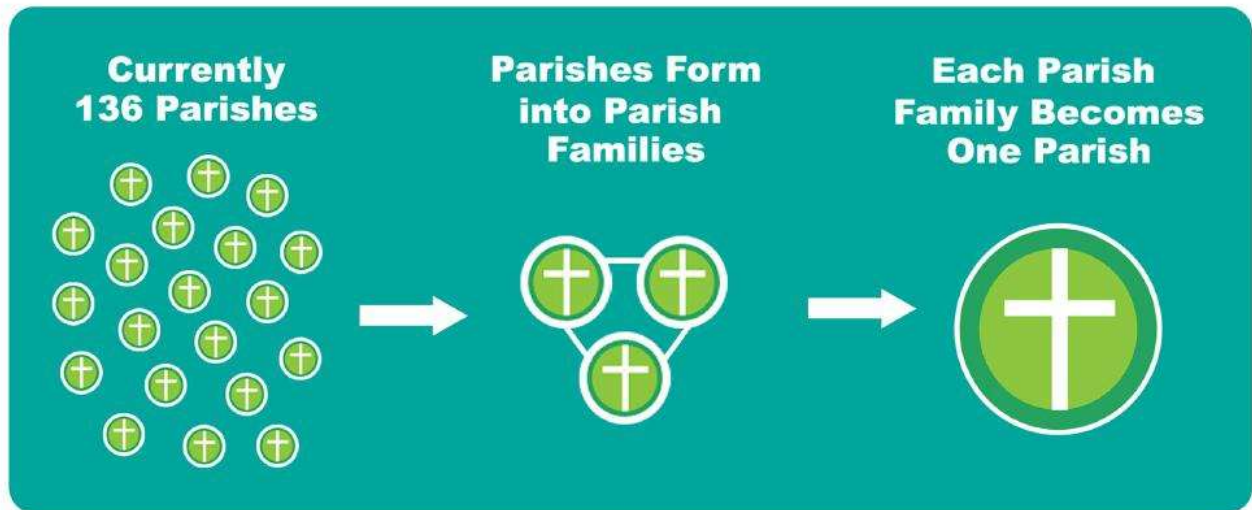
Archdiocesan policies for Partners in the Gospel are being prepared and will be available on the archdiocesan website. I have intentionally kept these policies simple. I want to keep the “musts” to a minimum to foster the pastoral creativity within each family — so that pastors, working in consultation with their people, can develop the way of being one family that works best for their communities.

Parishes will not be left to do this work alone. The Archdiocese of Seattle will provide a liaison for each parish family to support you, work with you, connect you with resources and help you achieve the various benchmarks along the way to becoming one canonical parish.



Accompany each other

The Journey to Vibrancy



A GRACED OPPORTUNITY

In the nearly 175-year history of the Archdiocese of Seattle, Partners in the Gospel is unprecedented in its scope, and in some ways, our local Church will look quite different when the process is complete. But this is not the first time our local Church has dealt with change. Far from it! The history of the Archdiocese of Seattle is the story of people encountering change with faith, courage and imagination. From humble beginnings to grand visions, from times of retrenchment to times of dizzying growth, we have adapted creatively, welcomed the stranger and responded to the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel. This local Church has always encountered challenges with faith in God and confidence in God's promises. Missionary creativity and pastoral flexibility have been the hallmarks of our history.

I have great confidence that we will encounter the present moment with that same faith and vision. Coming together as parish families will involve a lot of change, and change can be difficult. Letting go of what is familiar and facing the unknown

can be unsettling, even painful. But times of change can also be exciting. There are new possibilities, even a new adventure. I firmly believe that this process presents us with an extraordinary opportunity. If we open ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and respond creatively, this reorganization offers us the possibility of renewing and re-envisioning parish life in order to carry out our mission more effectively.

We are all called and gifted by the Lord to be apostles and evangelists (cf. Ephesians 4:11-12) — and we are all called to conversion (cf. Mark 1:15). If we look within, it seems to me that each of us needs re-evangelization. We all need to be more and more convinced of the power of the Risen Christ, who has already conquered sin and death. Then, and only then, are we capable of being living witnesses to the resurrection of Christ. We need to *live* the Gospel by putting it into action. We need to awaken from our worldly slumber and be renewed in the life of the Risen Jesus!

There is so much Gospel work for us to do. We live in a region with great wealth and great poverty. There is need all around us — material need

and spiritual need. So many people look to us for help. So many people are hungry for good news. And we have good news to share — the best news of all. What Jesus said to his disciples, he says now to us: "I tell you, look up and see the fields ripe for the harvest" (John 4:35).

As our communities work together to become new faith families, we have a graced opportunity to reflect on what it truly means to be a community of missionary disciples. In the *Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis wrote about what a parish is. It is a passage that deserves to be quoted at length:

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 (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 28).

I believe that this process of Partners in the Gospel — which will stretch us in many ways — can help us achieve this vision of what a parish can and ought to be. Our parish families are called to become what Pope Francis calls “a community of communities.” I believe that, not just after this process, but *through* the way we carry out this process, we can become more vibrant and healthy faith communities.

While I was still a priest in Indianapolis, there was a growing parish in need of a new church. I asked the pastor when he was going to build a church, and his response was memorable: “Before I build a church, I need to build ‘Church’ among the people.” This seems to me our primary opportunity in Partners in the Gospel — to build Church among our people. This is precisely why the Church Fathers in the Second Vatican Council call us the People of God!

HOW DO WE MEASURE HEALTH AND VIBRANCY?

How do we know we have healthy, vibrant, sustainable parishes? I am aware that we must be careful how we define health and vibrancy when it comes to parish communities. Financial stability is certainly one measure — but if we base our judgment exclusively on

numbers, we put some communities at a disadvantage. Thriving programs for adults and children are another measure of health — but if that is all we look at, we might sideline small and rural communities with fewer resources. Each parish is unique, and as parishes become part of families, we do not want to lose that uniqueness.

Partners in the Gospel is not intended to make our communities all look alike. We must not discard our individual histories, nor lose the gifts that small and rural parishes bring by holding them to standards that only work for larger, more affluent parishes. As Partners in the Gospel unfolds, we have a particular responsibility to keep in mind our ethnic and cultural communities and ensure that they are being well served and fully included in the broader faith family. We need to bring the Church's “preferential option for the poor” to bear in this process.

We must recognize our diversity for what it is — a gift from God.

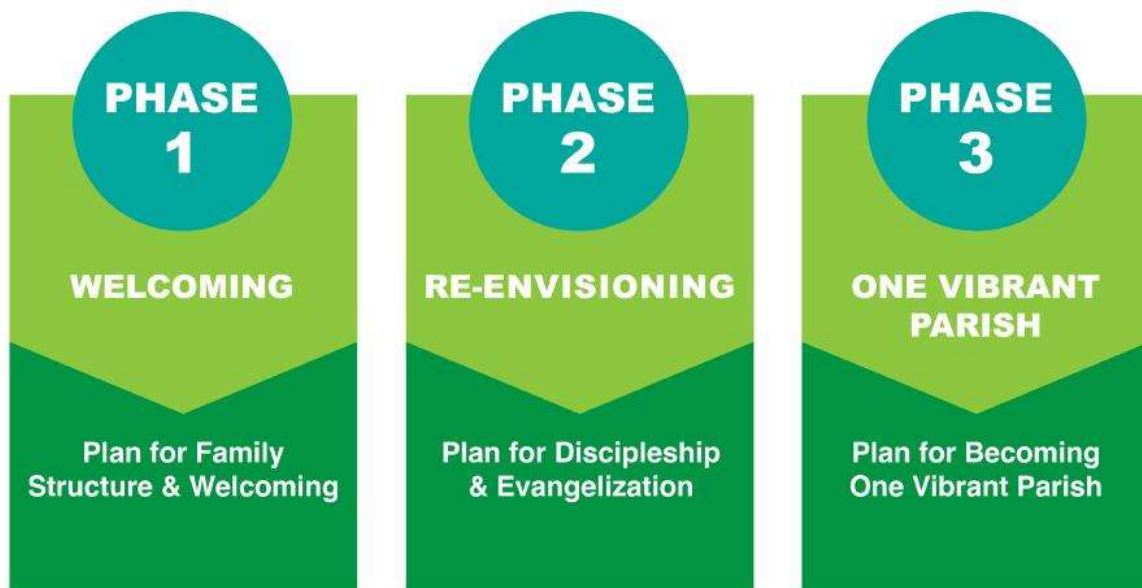
So how do we know if a parish is truly vibrant? I want to suggest some areas which can serve as benchmarks of health and vibrancy — pillars of parish life. These pillars are not necessarily distinct or prioritized in any way, as many overlap and build on each other. They are also not exhaustive, but are simply a way for us to examine parish life.

A healthy parish community is focused on **discipleship**. The word “disciples” — which means “learners” — expresses a key dimension of our relationship with Christ, since we never stop learning from the teacher. We are missionary disciples, always in need of being evangelized ourselves, and always called to spread the good news and lead others to Christ. A healthy parish community provides ways for all members and seekers to grow in discipleship.

Live the joy of the Gospel



Stephen B. Hear



A healthy parish community is grounded in **worship and prayer**. The celebration of the Eucharist at each Mass is the center of parish life, truly the “source and summit,” drawing each member of the community deeper into relationship with Christ, forming them into one body and sending them forth in love and service.

A healthy parish community looks beyond itself to engage in **mission and evangelization**. A parish is not a place to retreat from the troubles and challenges that are present in our broader community and our world. Rather, it is a place to join with others to be nourished in our life in Christ, from which we are sent into the world to make a difference, alleviate suffering, care for the afflicted and advocate for the voiceless. In service of others, especially the poor, we encounter Christ. A healthy parish recognizes needs and responds, reaching out as the Body of Christ. As disciples, we carry Christ to others in the world and bring them to Christ in return.

Community does not happen by chance. Community must be fostered. A healthy parish community is not cliquish, closed in on itself, but open and welcoming, a wide circle that

grows ever wider through active invitation of new members. A healthy community also makes room for members to celebrate and preserve their own culture and faith traditions even as they come together in mutual respect and understanding.

A healthy parish has effective **administration**. In the Church, administration is not just a necessary evil, the “business side of things.” Rather, administration is a spiritual gift to the Church, and those with administrative responsibilities truly carry out the work of the Gospel. A healthy parish is financially stable, a community whose members support it with their time, talent and treasure. A strong parish is able to maintain its buildings and manage its debt. A healthy parish has the technology it needs to carry out its mission. Good administration gives the pastor and the community the freedom to look beyond immediate needs and dedicate resources to evangelization and mission.

To make all this happen, **leadership** is key. All of us have experienced the incredible difference a good pastor makes. A good pastor not only guides us in our sacramental encounters with

Christ, but also helps us discover our gifts and share them. Good leaders empower others, consult widely and serve humbly. This is the kind of leadership that Pope Francis has modeled for the Church — and it is what he calls all of us to, especially our priests.

We all know that priests are not the only ones who exercise leadership in the Church today. A healthy and vibrant parish also needs the invaluable leadership and support provided by faithful and well-formed deacons and lay people. That is why we as an Archdiocese are relaunching our formation programs both for permanent deacons and for lay ministers.

OUR JOURNEY

With Partners in the Gospel, we are embarking on a journey that will take us to new places as a local Church. There will be much that is unfamiliar in the years ahead — there will be joy as well as grief, as together, we learn what it means to be become parish families. My prayer, and my hope, is that in this process, we will build sustainable, vibrant communities — communities that allow priests and people to thrive and carry the Gospel

more effectively to the people of Western Washington.

We are doing something new. But in a way, we are doing what our local Church has always done when faced with new circumstances and new challenges. I think of the missionary bishops and priests, religious and lay people who established the Church here in spite of formidable realities that could easily have discouraged them — but instead inspired them. I think particularly of Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart, who, with the dauntless Sisters of Providence, helped build the Church across the Northwest with few resources other than an abundance of faith and a tremendous amount of hard work.

“I do not think that we should wait until we are as well organized as in the East before we act to respond to the needs,” Mother Joseph wrote in 1858. “It seems to me that we should be glad to feel the pinch, in order to do good.” Her words have special resonance for us in this moment. It is all too easy for us to focus on the many challenges and difficulties present in our world and even in the Church. But if the challenges and difficulties are all we focus on, then we will never effectively carry out the mission Christ has entrusted to us.

AN INVITATION

I want to end this letter with an invitation.

I invite all of us to pray. Let us pray for the success of this effort on good days and on bad days — when our efforts are going smoothly and when we encounter challenges along the way. Let us keep praying when we are encouraged and when we are discouraged. Let us invite the Holy Spirit in every day, to guide and inspire everything we do.

I invite all of us to participate. We all have insights and gifts we can share with our parish families. In a particular way, I invite our young people to participate in this effort. We need your presence, your gifts, your voices. As St. Paul teaches, the manifestations of the Spirit are given for some benefit — so let us put our many gifts to work for the benefit of the entire Body of Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:7).

I invite our priests and parish leaders to enter into this process in a spirit of hope and collaboration. I am not going to tell you that it will be easy to re-envision and renew parish life — it won't be. But I can assure you that it will be possible. Consult widely, listen to each other and the faithful, discern together and think creatively. I have

instructed my team at the Chancery that Partners in the Gospel is our focus for the next several years. We are committed to supporting you through this process every step of the way.

Lastly, I invite all of us to become partners in the work of the Gospel. None of us can do this work alone. Jesus calls us in community and as community.

Our task as a local Church is nothing less than to embody the risen Christ: to make him credible by the way we live our faith, by the way we incarnate Christ as Church, the mystical Body of Christ. May the power of the Paschal Mystery of the Risen Christ be our strength and grace as together we lead and re-envision this local Church, as partners in Christ's Gospel. Ω

In the heart of Christ,



Most Rev. Paul D. Etienne, DD, STL
Archbishop of Seattle

This pastoral letter is available in Spanish and Vietnamese at archseattle.org/partners.

