

“Where there is no vision, the people will perish.” (Prov. 29)

In late April, ACC sent a survey to its supporters, asking them to create a vision of how their “ideal” parish community would look. What would be the characteristics of a place that drew the attention of news reporters in a positive light? What things would get people excited and proud to be part of that parish and to be a Catholic in the world today?

We received the largest response ever for a survey (thank you!) and these entries show that we DO have a dream! Although there were some differences, collectively, we see a focus on creating a caring community where inclusion, vibrant liturgies, outreach to the disadvantaged and transformative faith are hallmarks. As one of our committee said, “It is clear to me that the respondents can imagine a church re-energized by the presence of God, the actions of Empathy and Compassion which characterize the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the intensely radical stirrings of the Holy Spirit that are found in this new vision of Church!! This survey is a wonderful experience!”

We have decided to knit together many exact phrases and comments from the survey responses to give you this “report”. Just as athletes use imaging during competitions to help achieve victory, we hope that this vision, taken from **your** responses, will enable all of us to move forward to make this vision a reality.

Survey Results

Overview

It is hardly surprising that we find **God, the Spirit, Jesus, and Christ** among the most frequently occurring words in the survey responses. We sense the presence of the Holy Spirit in the responses and were reminded how Jesus would always want us to think and act with compassion and empathy. Here is a sample of the phrases people associate with God, Spirit, Jesus, and Christ.

A community committed to social justice... a down to earth Christian community... inclusion – diversity... community in love with God and with each other... We live the call to “be Christ” to one another... A truly welcoming community... we house homeless families & accompany people to Dept. of Social Services to witness to their disability and need... Acceptance of all people... services that are full of JOY... women in leadership... affordable Catholic education... All are welcome... Allow divorced Catholics to have fullness in the church... I don't believe that Jesus ever said women can't be priests... Assistance to the sick and elderly... Being Catholic means to me to focus on Jesus' message in the way Pope Francis does... Christ's love shining clearly through each of us... community members talk freely to one another about Jesus, the gospel message and how they struggle with bringing it to life... Complete inclusivity - full communion for all individuals regardless of sexual orientation, gender, race, marital status, etc... Contemplative vision... the definition of Church as defined in Lumen Gentium: “The Church is the People of God”. ... everything in the Parish builds them up as the body of Christ... To be Christ for others, as Christ is for us... Love, is what it means to me to be Catholic...

Five major themes emerge: welcome and inclusiveness, lay participation, Mass/liturgy, full inclusion of women, and social justice/service. They are presented below as if being described by the reporter who visited this community.

Welcome and Inclusiveness

I immediately sense a different kind of atmosphere. Tremendous hospitality toward newcomers... Visitors feel welcomed, the community is thrilled to have them there. There's coffee and chat and extended sharing before and after mass. There is an aliveness that is evident as soon as people begin to gather. All people are respected and treated equally. It's a welcoming and affirming church without judgment or distinction based on age race gender or sexual orientation or class. The priest knows people by name and is interested in their thoughts and concerns. It's an amazingly diverse place.. All people are treated with respect, including children. At the beginning of the service, children are addressed and welcomed. In the readings I heard about what community was like in the early church and in the sermon encouragement to live like this and approach others in the spirit of Christ. Prior to Communion, the priest tells the congregation that all people and denominations are welcomed in the parish life and are invited to come to the Eucharistic table for communion. The service opened with a song that captured what I experienced: "All are welcome."

Lay Participation

I can feel a difference: here, there is a strong sense of ownership by the laity. The people are taking responsibility for running the parish, allowing the priest to devote his time to helping people grow in faith, visiting the sick and working with others in the community in accomplishing a mutually agreed upon mission. The pastor respects his diverse congregation's gifts and encourages them to confront, question and engage in a free exchange of thoughts. Parishioners are an integral part of the governance of the parish. The Parish Council has been revised from an advisory board to a governing board with all members having an equal vote. This cooperative governance of the church community, with lay people in key leadership positions, has led to a vibrant sense of responsible participation. The people have a voice and they feel empowered to be using their baptismal gifts. The vibrancy of the parish is directly correlated to the participation of lay leaders.

Mass/Liturgy

People of varying ages, nationalities, skin color and sexual orientation are singing and responding vibrantly in the weekend liturgies. While the Eucharist is center to the liturgy, a wide variety of inspirational music is enthusiastically enjoyed. One can hear the congregation in full voice, creating an atmosphere of warmth and love. Homilies are an important part of the Mass, delivered by priests, men and women, as well as lay members, connecting knowledge of the scriptures with application to people's lives today. The Mass is so central to the congregation that priests, deacons and community

members, share, preparation and design of the liturgy. Oftentimes interested families join the liturgical group to contribute to ideas and themes. There is a spirit of inclusiveness and welcome which permeates the church before, during and after liturgy. People hunger for the Word and have a chance to celebrate Mass at home, or create liturgies that are prayerful and meaningful, even when clergy are not available.

Full Inclusion of Women

Here in this community, women are no longer second class; they are visible in the liturgy, in leadership, and in various outreach ministries.

On this Sunday morning, women and men are around the altar, a married woman priest presides while her husband, children, and grandchildren beam with love as she celebrates her First Mass following yesterday's ordination. Women, both ordained and lay, now serve in many capacities as liturgical ministers. They are priests, deacons, even bishops, women who felt called to ordination, completed extensive theological and pastoral training, and then accepted the call of their communities to serve as clergy. There are also lay women who read the scriptures, proclaim the Gospel and preach. Women, and men, are sharing their faith experiences with the congregation. The presence of the feminine adds a touch of beauty hard to describe but never before experienced at Mass.

Women are in positions of influence at all levels of Church leadership; women and men are equals in this community and all leaders lead alongside people not above or over them. In outreach, this community is advocating for justice for women, seeking to remove discrimination against women in the church and society. Our Family Life minister truly focuses on the family in the world. She attends school board meetings since their decisions effect children, goes to the school plays and takes regular walks to the playgrounds and ball fields to be where families are. She brings all this knowledge back to the parish to inform decisions about families. She calls this Park Bench Evangelization.

As I left the Mass that Sunday morning, a father came up to me to say: "I am thrilled that at long last, in this place our daughters are as welcomed and cherished as our sons."

SERVICE and SOCIAL JUSTICE

As I further learn about this community, I am struck by a spirit of mutual support; there is a focused vibrancy, a web of care and concern for others. Relationships were clearly strong and deep. No sterile political correctness here. "Being Christ for others as Christ is for us" proclaims the mission statement located at the various entrances to the Parish facility.

As I glance at the bulletin to learn more I see an astonishing array of opportunities to

participate in direct outreach and service to the poor, marginalized, forgotten, hungry, unemployed, and distressed. There are two pages in the centerfold laid out like a classified section. One side is titled "Service Opportunities" where many charitable activities are represented: pregnancy help, homelessness, visiting the sick, elderly and shut ins, cleaning houses, driving to medical appointments, seasonal fundraising to stock food banks, volunteering in a women's shelter, educational opportunities for prisoners to earn their GEDs, an African food-packing event and sharing funds with our twinning parish. The other side, labeled, "Working toward Global Justice" lists many events for education, advocacy and inter-faith awareness building on a wide range of issues. This is a place dedicated to peace and justice!

Congratulations! This "vision for the Church of the future" comes directly from your own words. The dream is inspirational. Now there are some obvious questions: "How do we achieve this together?" "What role do each of us play?" We would like to build upon this vision in creating a "virtual collaboration" using your suggestions and next steps. How could we support YOU? We recognize that pieces of this dream may already be a reality, so tell us about it so we can provide action models for others to replicate and implement. Please send suggestions and examples for sharing to sheilapeiffer.acc@gmail.com .

In our next newsletter we'll report on next steps and shining models to bring this dream to reality. Eager to hear from you as we co-create this vision and take action!