

Inquiring minds want to know

A Partners in the Gospel Q&A

By Helen McClenahan and Kate McEntee DeWeese

The Archdiocese of Seattle is well into the second year of parish families, but many questions still surround the Partners in the Gospel strategic planning initiative and what the future holds for the Catholic Church in Western Washington.

Inspired by a recent forum at Holy Cross Parish in Tacoma, we gathered questions from local Catholics to provide answers — and maybe bust a few myths.

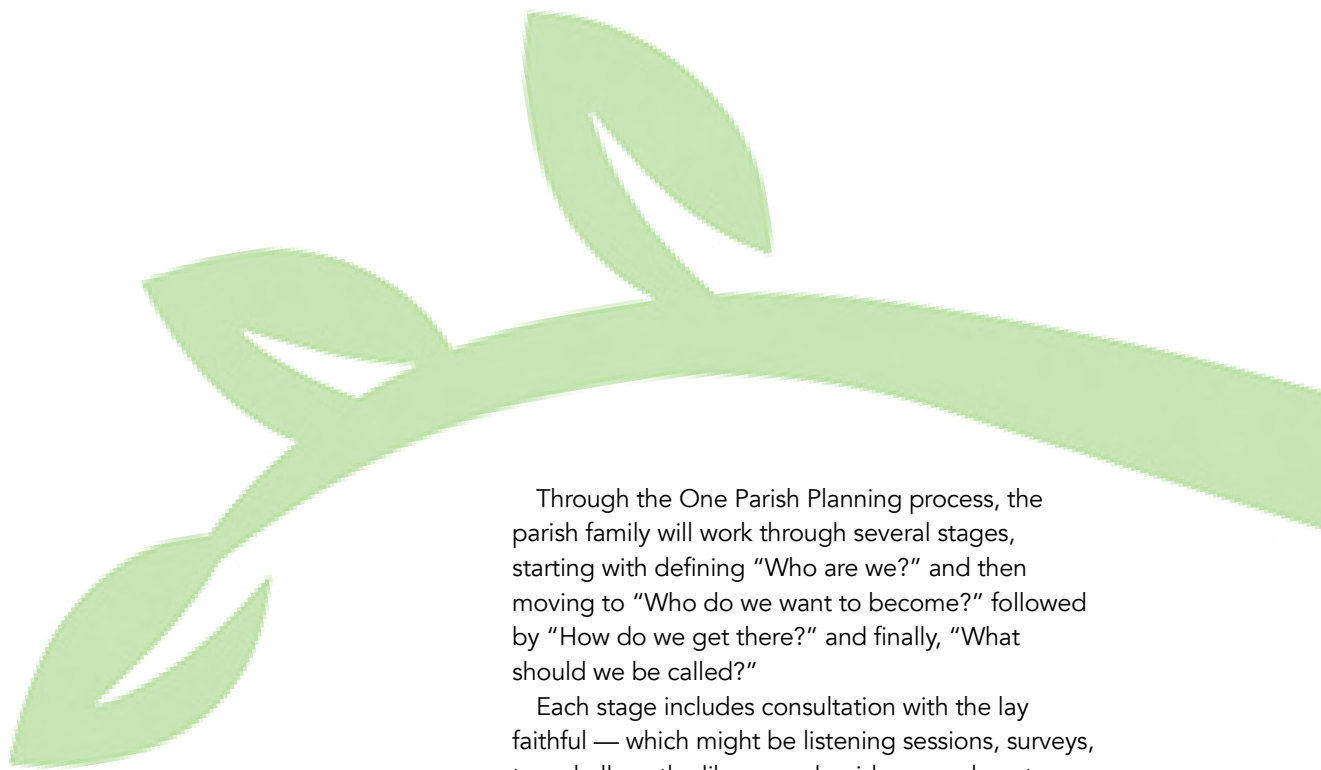
Q: Why are we doing Partners in the Gospel?

Over the past few decades, our local Catholic Church has experienced a decrease in sacramental participation, priests and engaged parishioners, dwindling finances, deteriorating campus conditions and more. These realities have put a stress on the Church's ability to dynamically live out its mission.

By bringing two or more parishes together in a parish family, parishioners will benefit from the shared gifts, talents, finances and more from each

of the joining parishes. This means that a parish family may have more resources to carry out the mission, which could include a larger, active youth group, more volunteers for important ministries and more opportunities for outreach and service.

Among of the biggest realities we face is the dwindling number of priests. We have seen a sharp decline in men joining the priesthood in the past 40 years. Sadly, our presbyterate is getting older, and we have had 26 priest deaths in the past two years.



While it's excellent that we have seen a slight uptick in our seminarians — currently 17 in the program — we do not have enough to help us pastor all our individual parishes in the future.

Q: Our parish is thriving. Why are we part of this? Can you just focus on struggling parishes?

If you put two struggling parishes together, you get a struggling parish family. The reality is many parishes are saddled with trying to maintain structures that were great when the Church was growing in the Northwest. But it's not now, so we cannot keep going as we have been.

The decision was made for all parishes to be part of Partners in the Gospel so that we're not just maintaining the health of a particular parish but maintaining the health of all parishes, allowing every Catholic to experience the fullness of the faith and a renewed energy for evangelization. Each parish is connected — connected to the wider Church, the archbishop and the Holy Father. That's what it means to be a universal Church.

Q: We are a small parish, and they are a large parish. Can't they just outvote us?

First, it's important to note that this is not a voting process. This is a prayerful approach that encourages everyone to leave behind their personal agenda and be open to the Holy Spirit. What is God calling our community as a whole to be?

Through the One Parish Planning process, the parish family will work through several stages, starting with defining "Who are we?" and then moving to "Who do we want to become?" followed by "How do we get there?" and finally, "What should we be called?"

Each stage includes consultation with the lay faithful — which might be listening sessions, surveys, town halls or the like — and guidance on how to use these insights to discern the path forward on behalf of the entire community and not just one group.

Q: What is the difference between a canonical parish and a church?

A parish is a community of the faithful: people as well as the canonical boundary that it covers. A church refers specifically to the building itself. Through Partners in the Gospel, parishes were placed into a parish family to work together to become one new canonical parish. This does not change the canonical status of the church buildings, which retain their names.

Q: Hasn't the archdiocese already decided which churches will close?

No. It's up to the parish family to discern how to use its resources and facilities.

A new canonical parish may have multiple church buildings. Any changes to churches or other buildings on a campus — sales, closures, renovations, reuse — will be determined by the parish family.

Q: Are you doing this to sell property and pay for abuse claims?

No. When a parish sells a property, the proceeds remain with the parish, with very few exceptions. There is no financial incentive at the archdiocesan level to sell parish properties because the money remains with the parish.

Q: Can we bring priests from other countries to serve here?

We already do. We have a few dozen priests — called “extern priests” — from other countries, and we could not operate the way we do without them. Right now, there are priests from Chile, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ghana, India, Kenya, Malawi, Mexico, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Poland, South Korea, Tanzania, Uganda and Vietnam serving in the archdiocese.

Q: What are you doing to support vocations?

In addition to ongoing prayer, vocation events and awareness campaigns, we have a full-time vocations director, Father Justin Ryan, and team focused on increasing vocations to the priesthood and religious life. In January, the archdiocese launched Called by Name, a parish-based program to involve the laity in vocations work. In February, parishioners from 63 parishes submitted the names of 200 men and 61 women for the vocations team to contact and invite to discernment events.

Most vocations do not come from priests or a diocesan vocations team. They come from families and friends who encourage young men and women to discern religious life.

It is up to every person — parent, teacher, aunt, uncle, grandparent, coach, neighbor — to ask young men, “Have you considered the priesthood?”

Q. What can I do to help my parish and our greater Church?

Pray for our Church and our clergy, for more vocations, for people who have left the faith to return, for the Holy Spirit to guide decision-making.

Invite friends to come to Mass or to join you at

Bible study, a Lenten fish fry or in a volunteer activity. Invite young Catholics to consider religious life.

Consider if you are being called to serve as a lay ecclesial minister — roles like catechist, youth minister, religious education teacher and pastoral associate. These positions support the work of priests and deacons and are vital to building our Catholic community and forming disciples.

Attend consultation sessions or parish meetings and encourage fellow parishioners to join you. This way, you can hear what’s happening, share your hopes, questions and concerns and discover what others are thinking about the future of your parish family. Partners in the Gospel hinges on parishioners being part of the process.

Learn more about Partners in the Gospel and find answers to more frequently asked questions at archseattle.org/partners.