
Summary and Highlights

Background and Approach

The combined parishes of Immaculate Conception and St. Joseph (ICSJ) contracted with Partners for Sacred Places to study the feasibility of launching a fundraising campaign to retire the parish's significant debt obligation to the Archdiocese of Chicago. The goal of the study was to gauge opportunities and challenges in the following areas:

- Philanthropic appeal of proposed project(s)
- Capacity of staff and lay leadership to undertake the project
- Perception of the parish among parishioners and community members
- Gift potential of interested and committed donors

In carrying out this study, Partners for Sacred Places (Partners) conducted a series of private, confidential interviews with individuals representing a variety of parish constituencies. Based on the results of these interviews, Partners developed a report to analyze the feasibility of the proposed campaign and to advise the parish of the necessary next steps to achieve its goals.

Summary of Findings

Leadership

Fr. Lisowski works well as an executive model pastor who is able to oversee the parish's wide operations and ministries. Within this model, Fr. Lisowski has encouraged laity and new members of the parish to step up into various roles and areas of service. Many parishioners are excited by what they called Fr. Lisowski's "innovative" leadership style. The combined parishes are still making the significant transition to a newer model of leadership.

Finances

The management and oversight of parish finances has improved. Increasingly, there is regular reporting to the parish at large about financial matters, including income and expenses. Even so, many parishioners sometimes feel uninformed or confused about general issues related to parochial finances. While Fr. Lisowski has accomplished very important reductions in parish expenses and streamlined operations for efficiency and cost, unanswered questions remain about the long-term financial outlook for the parish as it continues to maintain and make capital investments in two active worship sites. A renewed commitment to engaging all parishioners in active and meaningful stewardship is underway and beginning to make slow but steady progress. Though still low, participation among parishioners is increasing, and the overall amount of parochial pledges and gifts has increased. An effort is gaining momentum to cultivate laity as leaders in stewardship efforts.

Facilities

The parish is endowed with several beautiful, well-cared for, and substantial buildings. The capital projects that resulted in nearly \$19 million worth of investment in physical assets has given the parish a series of facilities equipped to serve it well. However, the cost of maintaining these buildings and the inevitable need for capital investments in years to come means that discernment and strategic decision-making is necessary to understand how best to manage this demanding portfolio of real estate.

Volunteers and Lay Leadership

New families are invited into many of the parish's activities and programs. There is a solid corps of committed, longtime members who provide the majority of leadership for various groups within the parish, including the Pastoral Council and Finance Council. They are involved and dedicated to the life and ministry of the parish with passion and a deep sense of ownership. Though this group is small, it is beginning to grow as new members are solicited for their individual talents and gifts and encouraged to step up. Other volunteers still see themselves as part of separate, mostly unrelated areas of parish life. This contributes to a weakening of the sense of unity among parochial volunteers as a unit committed to common goals and causes.

Perception and External Relationships

Incredible change marks the transformation of the neighborhoods shared by Immaculate Conception and St. Joseph's. Since the demolition of Cabrini-Green and the relocation of many of its residents, the immediate neighborhood surrounding St. Joseph's has been slowly gentrifying, welcoming new young families and individuals with means. Contrary to some perceptions within the parish about where school families reside, a number of these families in the surrounding community have chosen to enroll their children at ICSJ School and contributed the school's ongoing success. At present, the visibility of the parish is low, aside from the attention the school attracts among neighbors. While St. Joseph's large and important historic building should attract attention on its own, a lack of signage diminishes its immediate visible presence in the neighborhood.

Identity and Assets

Immaculate Conception and St. Joseph's is a parish with a future of vitality, renewal, and a strong Catholic presence in a changing community in the heart of Chicago. The success of the school illustrates the uniquely positive trends that have favored investment in Catholic education in the Archdiocese of Chicago. While the percentage of families with enrolled students who are also parishioners is lower than many would hope, the school is still drawing significant numbers of families into the parish. In interviews, the majority of school parents were positive about the added value the parish provides in shaping a full and complete Catholic family life centered on Catholic education and parish involvement. However, the general relationship between the parish and the school is much weaker.

Gift Potential

The feasibility study includes the analysis of the gift potential of church members and friends of the parish. At this time we advise the Pastor, Pastoral Parish Council, and Parish Finance Council not to pursue a capital campaign. We suggest various ways for the parish to address specific areas over the next 12-18 months that will potentially strengthen the foundation for a possible campaign in the future. This amount of time should provide abundant occasion for continuing the upward trends outlined in "Findings," strengthening capacity, securing wide support for common mission, and growing partnerships within the community.

Recommendations

- Improve Communications

Partners believes that by employing a systematic approach to improving communications, it will be easier for the parish to define its vision and align its energy with a strategy to manifest that vision. In order to move ahead with this, Partners recommends these two important steps:

- Create a Communications Task Force
- Develop and Implement a Social Media Strategy
- Attend Workshops to Develop and Strengthen Internal Capacity

As a still growing parish with new members and new opportunities ahead, there is ample room for participating in activities and training that will identify and develop internal capacity to accomplish the essential foundational work that makes any potential fundraising effort successful. Based on Partners nationally successful training workshops, the following two training sessions are suggested as venues for acquiring and refining new skill sets and information that will support the parish's future.

- Internal and Capital Campaign Fundraising
- Asset-Based Community Development and Asset-Mapping