



Q&A

Q: What is Partners in the Gospel?

A: Partners in Gospel is the next stage of the strategic pastoral planning effort taking place across the Archdiocese of Seattle to re-invigorate and renew our local Catholic Church.

Q: Why the focus on strategic pastoral planning?

A: The mission of the Catholic Church is at the heart of strategic pastoral planning. To achieve our mission, we must re-invigorate our parish communities, which includes adapting to the needs of the faithful and to our current reality. As part of strategic pastoral planning, we continually examine our resources and how we can best use them to support vibrant, sustainable, mission-focused parish communities across the entire Archdiocese of Seattle.

Q: Why now?

A: Today we face many realities that are impacting parish life and making it difficult to fully live out our mission. We face an urgent – yet exciting – opportunity to transform parish life.

Over the past few decades our local Catholic Church has experienced a decrease of engaged parishioners, fewer priests, dwindling finances, deteriorating campus conditions and more. Here are just a few statistics:

- Today the archdiocese has 80 diocesan pastors for 174 locations; by 2036, we estimate we will only have 66 diocesan pastors, an 18% decrease. (We also have fewer seminarians and fewer lay ministry leaders.)
- While the overall population the Archdiocese of Seattle is growing, registered households are declining, along with Mass attendance, baptisms, first communions, marriages in the Church and parish giving:
 - From 2010 to 2019, Mass attendance as a percentage of total registered parishioners declined from 40.7% to 35.5%.
 - Between 2010 and 2019, baptisms declined 30% and weddings declined nearly 19%.
- Currently, 67% of parishes operate with a financial deficit (excluding extraordinary income, which is income apart from Sundays and Holy Days).

Q: What will be the outcome with Partners in the Gospel?

A: There is no predetermined outcome for this strategic pastoral planning effort. Together we will pray to the Holy Spirit to guide our efforts so that we can support our mission to encounter Jesus, accompany others and live the joy of the Gospel.

What we do know is that Partners in the Gospel will bring most parishes together into a new family structure with two or more other parishes. The pastor, parish leaders and parishioners will determine how this new family will best join together to carry out the mission of the Church as one parish.

Q: Can you define what you mean by “parish” and “parish family”?

A: A parish is defined as a certain community of the faithful stably constituted within the archdiocese, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a priest as its proper pastor under the authority of the Archbishop of Seattle. (c. 515§1)

Note that the term *parish* refers to the *community of people* and not the sacred building designated for divine worship — the church (with a lowercase “c”).

A parish family is a group of two or more neighboring parishes under the leadership of a pastor and one or more parochial vicars. Over time, the parish family will determine its own consultative leadership team(s) and how they may share resources such as staff, ministries and outreach.

Q: Will all parishes be in families?

A: The majority of parishes will be placed in a family. However, there will be some parishes, due to size or geographic location, that will not join a family. These parishes will still be part of the Partners of the Gospel renewal effort to determine how to best carry out the mission of the Church.

Q: When will this happen?

A: Here is a timeline of the key milestones for Partners in the Gospel:

- January 2023: Public launch
- Fall 2023: Invitation to provide input on parish families
- Early 2024: Final parish family structures announced
- July 2024: Parish families go into effect with one pastor
- 2024–2027: Parish families journey together
- 2027: Parish families become one canonical parish

Q: What are the benefits of this approach?

A: This highly consultative approach gives parishioners the ability to provide input and take an active role in building their local Church. The process allows communities time to truly journey together and accompany one another while forming one new vibrant community. It is intended to give priests more time for pastoral care.

The new parish family will benefit from the shared gifts, talents, finances, resources and more from each of the joining parishes. This consolidation means that the new parish family may have more resources to carry out the mission, which may mean benefits like a larger active youth group and fuller Masses in one location – and a larger outreach ministry at another location. It really comes down to the creativity and engagement of the parishioners and parish leaders to determine how the family will collaborate and carry out the mission.

Q: Does this mean parishes/churches are closing?

A: No – not necessarily. First, it is important to note the parish is not the church building. The parish is the community of the faithful and all that comes with it.

A parish family is comprised of different parish communities that will eventually become one canonical parish. Decisions will be made at the local level to reflect the needs of each parish community. The parish leadership, with input from parishioners and guidance from the Holy Spirit, will make decisions about how to best carry out the mission locally.

This means that the new parish will determine many things, such as what ministries to provide, what outreach to the community is possible, what Mass times to offer and what properties and buildings will be used and when.

Q: Is this simply expanded clustering?

A: To enable and support parishes in this renewal effort, Partners in the Gospel uses a fundamentally different approach to the current clustering structure.

The *parish family* is a temporary step on the way to becoming one *parish*. A comprehensive parish support plan is in development as part of this process. This support plan will include a newly formed group of liaison staff, employed and funded by the Chancery, who will partner with the pastor in guiding the parish family through the process of becoming one parish. In addition, many tools and resources are in development that will help support parishes every step of the way, including detailed handbooks for navigating prayer and worship, missionary discipleship, administration and finance, governance and leadership.

Q: Who is leading this effort?

A: There are many different groups involved in the research, planning and execution of this strategic pastoral planning effort:

- Partners in the Gospel Core Team is comprised of co-leads Caitlin Moulding, chief operations officer and Father Gary Lazzeroni, pastor of St. Joseph in Vancouver and 10 other lay leaders.
- Oversight Committee is a diverse group of lay leaders, priests, a religious sister, a deacon and our superintendent of Catholic Schools.
- Presbyteral Council is made up of priests elected by each of the 10 deaneries who advise and consult with Archbishop Etienne.

- Partners Edge is a research consulting firm that has helped other dioceses work through similar planning efforts.
- Parish family liaisons, who will be hired and trained by the Archdiocese of Seattle, will support parish families in the process of becoming one parish.
- You — we are asking for feedback and input from all employees and Catholics in the Archdiocese of Seattle in Fall 2023. We are also asking for everyone’s prayers for this effort.

Q: What is the process?

A: This is a multiyear, consultative process and everyone is invited to participate. In the first phase, the archdiocese will share and request feedback on an initial draft of the parish families with priests and parish leaders, school principals and leadership, archdiocesan employees and all Catholics across the archdiocese in the Fall 2023.

Once all the input has been collected, the Oversight Committee and the Presbyteral Council will finalize the recommendation. Archbishop Etienne will officially promulgate the new parish family structure in early 2024.

In the second phase, parish families will work together over three years to determine how they will best become one parish by 2027. Each parish family will have a liaison assigned to them to help throughout the process.

Q: How long does it last?

A: The consultative phase will take place throughout 2023. Once new parish families are officially formed in July 2024, they will have three years to become one parish. While this is the target date, we do recognize that each parish family is unique: Some parish families may wish to become one canonical parish sooner, while others may need a bit more time.

Q: What is the role of Partners Edge in this work?

A: Partners Edge, a research consulting firm, is supporting Partners in the Gospel in two main areas. First, Partners Edge collected Archdiocese of Seattle data and combined it with census information and their own experience working with other dioceses to create a “ Current Reality Report” for our region. The Current Reality Report captures the present condition of the archdiocese using demographic, sacramental and financial data.

Partners Edge, in conjunction with priests and lay leaders, will develop a draft of potential parish families for modification through significant consultation with priests, deacons and lay leaders throughout 2023. In Fall 2023, the consultation will be opened to all Catholics throughout the archdiocese.

Q: What does consultation involve?

A: Consultation gives everyone a chance to review the potential family structure, pray to the Holy Spirit about it and provide their input.

The process was built intentionally to ensure everyone has the opportunity to offer input. Specifically, there will be several stages of consultation:

- Draft 1: Input from Oversight Committee and Presbyteral Council.
- Draft 2: Changes incorporated and then shared with all priests.
- Draft 3: Changes incorporated and shared with all priests, internal audiences and the public.
- Draft 4: Changes incorporated and shared again with all priests.
- Final input will be incorporated by the Oversight Committee and Presbyteral Council, who will then make a final recommendation to Archbishop Etienne.
- In early 2024, the final parish family configurations will be announced.

Q: What is the role of the liaison?

A: The liaison is a professional hired and trained by the Archdiocese of Seattle to support parishes as they journey in their new family to become one parish. They will use the tools, resources and other guidance, currently under development, to help the parish family navigate how to approach prayer and worship, evangelization, administration, governance and other issues in their new configuration — accounting for the gifts and needs of its community.

Q: What will change at parishes when this is implemented?

A: The new parish family will have more collective resources (people and finances) to carry out the mission of the Church. What this looks like for each parish family will be determined by the creativity of the parish community. While each parish family will be assigned a pastor and one or more parochial vicars, all the other decisions are intended to be made by the local community to ensure what emerges reflects the gifts and needs of their specific communities.

Working with their liaison, each parish family will have resources and tools to help them along during this three-year process. These tools are under development now with the support of an archdiocesan workgroup to cover prayer and worship, missionary discipleship and evangelization, welcoming and community, and governance, administration and finance.

Q: What does this mean for priests?

A: Today, priests across the archdiocese are spread thin and spend significant time on administrative activities instead of pastoral care. With the implementation of Partners in the Gospel, over time, priests will be able to focus more of their efforts on the pastoral care of their communities and relationship building. Here are a few other changes:

- With the new family structure, some priests will become pastors, while others will become parochial vicars to ensure the best possible pastoral care for the community.

- Canon Law assumes a priest will celebrate no more than one regularly scheduled Mass per day. The law allows a priest, with permission from the bishop, to celebrate up to three Masses on a Sunday. We know that many priests are celebrating more than that today, and as part of our planning for the future, we need to look at the strain this puts on priests.

Q: How will priests be selected for the new parish family?

A: As with all priest placements, the Priest Personnel Board (PPB), made up of priests and Chancery leaders, makes recommendations to Archbishop Etienne. Each priest will have an individual conversation about their desires and how they would like to serve in the future – either as a pastor, a parochial vicar or in a different supportive role.

Q: What does this mean for parishioners?

A: Overall, parishioners should experience a more vibrant and engaged Catholic community. They will have more opportunities for personal faith growth and the opportunity for a closer relationship with their parish leaders.

Practically, it also means that parishioners will experience administrative changes. This will differ by parish family, but some changes might include a new pastor and parochial vicar, changes to Mass times and locations, and new outreach ministry opportunities.

Q: What does this mean for schools?

A: Schools are a vital ministry of a parish, and they will benefit from stronger parish families through Partners in the Gospel. In the near term, there will be no changes for Catholic schools. Parishes will be placed in a new parish family in 2024 and then the parish family will have three years to determine how it would like to join together. This planning process will include discernment around all ministries, including Catholic schools.

Catholic schools are key to our formation and evangelization efforts in the Archdiocese of Seattle. Determining how to ensure the growth and vitality of Catholic schools into the future will remain the work of school and parish leaders and school boards/commissions.

These leaders may draw upon the Partners in the Gospel resources and tools, as well as the support of the parish liaison.

Q: Will there be consolidation for schools?

A: While there are no predetermined outcomes from this work, the goal is to strengthen parish communities and Catholic schools. There are no plans or intentions for school closures as part of this process. Parish families, including school leaders, parents and parishioners, will discern the best approach for their particular school and parish community.

If a parish family comes together and more than one school is present, the new parish family leadership will evaluate the needs and opportunities present. Parish families have the opportunity to be creative and flexible in how they form one parish over time. If they decide to explore changes to the school structure within their parish family, they will work in close consultation with the Office for Catholic Schools.

Q: What does this mean for lay leaders?

A: As the Church lives out the Partners in the Gospel process, the work of Lay Ecclesial Ministers will become even more important. That is why we are investing in a new Lay Ecclesial Ministry formation program to strengthen and support our existing Lay Ecclesial Ministers while we train new ones. More information about this new program will be coming out in Spring 2023.

Q: Are other dioceses doing this?

A: Yes. Dioceses across the United States have implemented similar initiatives. The Partners in the Gospel Core Team has connected with many of them to hear their stories and gather recommendations. Using these insights, our archdiocesan team developed a planning and consultation model that reflects the uniqueness of the Archdiocese of Seattle. Our model is more consultative, embraces our cultural diversity and history, and reflects our large geography that includes concentrated city centers as well as suburban and rural communities.

While we appreciate the guidance and insights from other dioceses, success in the Archdiocese of Seattle will come from the creativity and collaboration of each parish family, led by the Holy Spirit.

Q: What can we do now?

A: We ask everyone to pray for this renewal effort. Each parish will receive prayer cards to distribute to their parishioners so they can pray individually and collectively during the year.

Additionally, we ask parish leaders to look for ways to foster community while grounding people in the mission of the Church. A new guide with ideas for how to do this will be issued in February for parish and ministry leaders. Suggestions include activities like:

- Praying the Partners of the Gospel prayer at Masses
- Lenten small group study across the archdiocese
- Small faith-sharing groups
- Discussions about the Current Reality Report (coming Spring 2023)