



July 1, 2026

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

May the blessings of our Lord Jesus Christ be with each of you!

As we reach the two-year anniversary of the formation of parish families across the Archdiocese of Seattle, I share my deep gratitude for all the hard work and engagement from the clergy, parish and school staffs, lay leaders, volunteers and parishioners. Together we prayed, listened to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and discerned how to renew parish life in Western Washington. We are on a holy journey, and I encourage you to not lose hope along the way – but instead see the light of Jesus Christ leading us forward.

When I first arrived in the Archdiocese of Seattle, many of my brother priests shared their frustrations and pain in serving communities where the practice of faith was declining. Many were saddened by empty pews on Sunday and families who no longer engaged in their faith as they did decades ago. In many places, sacramental life was dwindling, too, and volunteers were aging out of service. For some, time was spent “putting out fires” related to building maintenance and financial woes rather than “sparking the fire” of faith in the younger generation.

Our priests described the tangible impacts of decades of change:

- Parishes were once built for a local community who could walk to Mass or take a short car ride. The advent of freeways changed that dynamic.
- Many cultural parishes built to serve a specific immigrant population changed as the next generations no longer needed language-specific pastoral care.
- The aging status of many parish and school buildings required greater investments of time, energy and money – all of which pulled priests and other resources away from evangelization efforts.
- The number of priests who have died has far outpaced the number of men entering the seminary. Last year alone, we celebrated the lives of eight archdiocesan priests who died – while ordaining one new archdiocesan priest this year.

Scholars across the country have pointed out an array of factors for declining engagement in the Catholic Church. While there is great hope in the latest news of young people entering the Church, the fact remains that Mass attendance in 2026 has not yet rebounded to 2019 levels.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by these challenges, and on some days, I certainly feel this way. Yet Jesus himself gave us the mission to go and make disciples of all nations. He calls each of us to encounter him, accompany one another and live the joy of the Gospel every day. It is this mission and our trust in Him that give us hope for the future.

After much prayer, discernment and consultation with priests, lay leaders, other dioceses, and parishioners through the local synod, we developed a strategic pastoral planning process with the goal of refocusing all that we do as the Catholic Church in Western Washington on our mission.

How can we reorganize and restructure parishes so that we are spending more time reflecting Christ's radical love rather than trying to preserve the status quo that was designed for a different era?

**This is why our Partners in the Gospel journey began and continues.**

Like Moses leading people in the desert, we know this is not an easy journey. In these first few years, we have felt like we are spending significant time focused on administration, finances and buildings. Yet, as many other dioceses have shared with us, this initial administrative focus is required but should not distract from the real work of re-envisioning and reinvigorating our pastoral presence in our communities.

How can we combine efforts so that, together, we can better serve our communities as the living presence of Christ, especially for those who are sick and dying; for those who are poor or living on the margins; for the young who seek purpose? This is what Jesus called us to do!

**We are partners**

I intentionally chose the name "Partners in the Gospel" because this effort does not sit solely on the shoulders of our priests or our parish staff. It is an effort that we all own in partnership as co-responsible stewards of our local Catholic Church. Together, as the people of God, we are courageously re-imagining how to respond to the needs of the world today rather than struggling to maintain a parish structure built for a bygone era.

Since the formation of the parish families two years ago, we have seen communities embrace each other, extend generous hospitality, combine ministries to serve more people, offer joint youth programs and much more. This year, we welcomed more people into the Church than we have in years – many of whom expressed appreciation for their rich experiences with the joint faith formation programs offered by parish families. Dozens of reports from priests confirm that, while One Parish Planning may be challenging, they are filled with hope as they see some of the fruits of this effort already. Reports like this give me great hope and I know that this is just the beginning.

At the same time, we have experienced the reality that change is hard and slow. It requires us to set aside our own personal desires and agendas to recognize the needs of the larger Catholic family. And herein lies the opportunity to go beyond our comfort zones – beyond "our Mass" or "our ministry" – to recognize that everything we have is gift from God and that we are called to share what we have with others. What gifts, talents, opportunities and more do our parishes have that can be combined and shared for the greater good? This is at the heart of our One Parish Planning process, which guides parish families as they work together to creatively re-imagine parish life as a new parish community.

I wish to thank our clergy for saying "yes" to what some may see as impossible pastoral assignments during this time. Their fortitude and pastoral hearts of service are greatly appreciated. I also wish to thank our parish and school staffs for graciously navigating new territory and seeing the opportunities for positive changes as parishes work more closely together. I offer special thanks to the volunteers serving on the Parish Family Advisory Councils, responsible for representing parishioners and leading the parish family through the One Parish Planning process.

Finally, I wish to thank all parishioners who have been engaged in the process: through our baptismal calling and dignity, listening to the Holy Spirit, attending community consultation sessions, sharing ideas and feedback, praying for the effort, volunteering in new ways and

participating in parish life as One Parish Planning progresses.

**In-person community sessions this fall**

This effort is truly led by the Holy Spirit. Let us be strengthened by this truth as we journey to renew parish life, bringing the light of Christ into the world today. This fall, my team will be hosting in-person community sessions throughout the archdiocese to provide you with an update on the progress of Partners in the Gospel and answer your questions. I invite all of you to participate in these sessions.

Please continue to pray for this effort, asking God to guide us so that we truly listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and to our good and gracious God who shapes and forms the desires of our own hearts. Please know of my continued prayers for you, and I humbly ask for your prayers for me. As always, I remain,

In the Heart of Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paul D. Etienne". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "P" and a long horizontal flourish at the end.

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