

Sacred Heart Parish, Appleton

The New Evangelization- Our Story

Before you recover or begin to renew yourself you have to hit rock bottom first. This applies to institutions as well as individuals. Sometimes before a parish can start to rebuild itself it also has to hit rock bottom. Well, here at Sacred Heart in Appleton that is exactly what happened.

The unspoken fear by many was that we were a dying parish. Then in October of 2013 a turnaround began. A New Evangelization Committee was formed. This group of dedicated individuals has come together as a team and is working to reinvigorate our parish. Also, at the same time other changes were made that combined with the committee's efforts, have resulted in a new attitude and perception about the parish. There is a buzz in the air and people are excited to see the changes happening and the positive effects it is having on our parish.

We still have a long road ahead of us but the parish now has an air of optimism about its future. We have started to see the reversal of the negative past trends and are seeing growth and potential. We once again have young families joining our parish and once again have hope for the future of Sacred Heart.

Some Background:

First, let's give a little background to set the scene. In 2010 after 11 years as pastor of our parish, Fr. Bob Karuhn retired. It was at that point the rumblings started and the questions began- Will we get another pastor? What is going to become of the parish? The many concerns focused on what would happen to our parish in the future. At that point we were definitely struggling. We were an older congregation and felt we were facing an uphill battle to maintain a vibrant parish.

After an extremely rocky 12 months, we were linked with St. Bernadette Parish and Fr. Don Zuleger was assigned as our pastor. There was a sigh of relief and appreciation for Fr. Don's willingness to take on a second parish, however, confidence did not return. The unspoken fear that Sacred Heart might be merged or closed continued.

At an October 2013 staff meeting, in a discussion regarding the need to get the parish's annual goal of New Evangelization implemented, Fr. Don challenged Bill Nettekoven (youth ministry, parish life, RCIA and computer techie for the parish) to head it up. After the meeting Bill asked Dcn. Gib Schmidt (deacon and part-time liturgy coordinator for Sacred Heart / St. Bernadette Parishes) to co-lead the effort. The entire staff also provided input and assistance.

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Bill and Dcn. Gib put together an outline and programs to implement, however, before proceeding decided to meet with Julianne Stanz (Director of the New Evangelization for the Diocese of Green Bay) for her input and insight into what we should do. We quickly set up a meeting with her and were astounded by the great input that she provided.

With Julianne's agreement, we proceeded to hold listening sessions to get the pulse of the parish, to see what they liked, didn't like, thought we should keep and what we should get rid of at Sacred Heart.

Jesus is the Answer:

Also, in our conversation with Julianne, in regards to what program we should implement to renew our parish, we had indicated that we did not feel we could afford to fail. What would she recommend? Julianne replied with one word, "**Jesus**". **We needed to be renewed in prayer to Jesus, to let Him be our guide.** The first focus should be for those of us who are in the pews to be renewed in prayer, to allow Him to renew and guide us to then go forth to invite others to return. In the process we should look to something within our parish identity to be the focus.

To kick off this new direction for our parish Julianne agreed to give a presentation on discipleship. To achieve our goal to renew prayer, a focus on Jesus, connected with our parish identity, it was obvious to focus on a renewed devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. As a parish we needed to recognize the Sacred Heart as more than just the name of our parish.

With Fr. Don's blessing, in February 2014, meeting twice a month, a New Evangelization Committee was formed. Taking a suggestion from Fr. Don regarding prayer and the importance of it, we started each of our meetings by attending the Monday evening Mass at Sacred Heart. At the first meeting each month the committee went through the study guide for Matthew Kelly's book "The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic." At the second meeting each month we started working on what we could do to revitalize the parish (basing each meeting on the topic we had studied earlier.) During these working meetings we would brainstorm ideas for the parish, then we would vote on the top 2 or 3 priority items, and assign sub-committees to begin working on them.

Our initial meetings providing information were well attended, however, with the realization that **there were not any quick fixes**, our numbers decreased to a small but stable group.

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Sacred Heart Parish- Evangelization Strategies:

From input received at our listening sessions, discussions at our New Evangelization Committee meetings and our renewed focus on prayer specifically to the Sacred Heart the following was completed:

1. Evening Stations of the Cross with Benediction was again offered on Friday nights' during Lent
2. Small group sharing during Lent.
3. A Sacred Heart Brochure was created with a history of the devotion and prayers to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.
4. Renewal of the Consecration of the parish to the Sacred Heart
 - a. 6 weeks prior – Held an evening of reflection “The Sacred Heart of Jesus: The True Love Story” presented by Fr. James Kubicki, S.J.
 - b. During the 6 weeks at all Masses, as a congregation we prayed a prayer in preparation for the consecration.
 - c. Feast of the Sacred Heart, parish consecration, with Bishop Ricken.
5. “Fill the Pews Prayer Team” created with individuals/families praying for a specific pew, first for those who would be in that pew this coming weekend to be renewed and strengthen in their faith and then for those whom God is calling to come forth to fill that pew. Currently we have almost every pew with at least 2 families praying for it. They received an initial blessing from Bishop Ricken at our parish consecration and will be asked to renew the prayer commitment annually at our parish feast celebration.
6. From Julianne’s suggestion to have a place of devotion to the Sacred Heart, our side chapel, on the evening of our parish consecration to the Sacred Heart, was dedicated to and named as the Sacred Heart Chapel. A large icon of the Sacred Heart was also blessed and enthroned in the chapel.
7. Reinstated Children’s Liturgy of the Word.

There were other improvements and changes completed by other committees and individuals that took place at the same time and also helped to improve parish moral.

1. A new parish logo, incorporating a Sacred Heart symbol, was created by an artist in the parish, giving a contemporary appearance and a consistent logo on all parish communication, plus a new focus on the Sacred Heart.
2. Building improvements can be an often over looked aspect of revitalizing a parish. The simple effort of upgrading or sprucing up your building sends a strong message of your own self-image. Some of the things we did were expensive but a number were rather inexpensive. Below is a list of the improvements:

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- a. A retiree who grew up at Sacred Heart volunteered to rejuvenate the hallway and church floors to shine with pride.
 - b. Clutter was removed from the main hallway.
 - c. A flat screen TV was installed in the main hallway to promote upcoming events.
 - d. A sound loop was installed in the church to aid those with hearing aids.
 - e. A LED sign was installed outside the church to communicate with those driving on the heavily traveled Fremont Street what is happening at Sacred Heart.
3. A parish Facebook page was created and is used to communicate with our parishioners.
 4. Our parish website was redesigned and cleaned up ...including adding a real time parish calendar on the home page.

Some of the additional items our New Evangelization Committee is working on are:

1. Developing a mentoring program for new members.
2. Developing a Sacred Heart brochure describing the parish to new and interested members.
3. Developing a Men Fellowship group
4. Offering small groups this fall and again during Lent.

If we have any words of wisdom to share it would be that **perseverance is critical**. Remember how when Peter first saw Jesus walking on the water, he too walked on water to get to Jesus. It was only after the doubts starting settling in that he started to sink, it was only when Jesus reached out to him and restored his faith did he again rise up out of the water and walk towards Jesus. So when the doubts start creeping in and they will, it is then time to dig deep and renew your faith, because by keeping the faith we too can walk on water and achieve the results we are looking for...a revitalized and growing parish...alive and on fire for the Lord!

The good news is it works. It will not happen overnight and we still have a long way to go, but with all we are doing and what we have done, we are no longer hearing the whispers about when is Sacred Heart is going to close. Instead it is being replaced with a chorus of look at what is happening in our parish.

Yours in Service to Christ,

Bill Nettekoven
Dcn. Gib Schmidt