



Parish Discernment Process

Introduction

The purpose of these materials is to assist parish leadership (pastors, clergy, and lay leadership) in their receipt of the diocesan strategic plan, and especially the task of discerning which of the six priorities to emphasize first. This initial discernment should occur during the summer of 2024 to begin to address the priority starting in the fall 2024.

Preparation

Determine who will participate in the discernment process. In most cases, participants will include the pastor and clergy, staff, and parishioner leaders (including but not limited to the pastoral council; representation of varying age and ethnic groups is beneficial).

Invite and secure commitment of participants- participation in gatherings and completion of “homework”

Identify meeting dates/times for discernment

Invoke and surrender your personal and collective discernment process to the Holy Spirit

Overview of Discernment Process

Gathering 1: Set the Stage

Prayer – modeled after the prayer engaged by the Diocesan Pastoral Council and emphasizing a posture of surrender to the Holy Spirit, periods of silent meditation, and spontaneity.

Read and discuss the Strategic Vision and Plan Mission and Vision statements

Walk through the discernment process

Between gathering “homework”

- Pray each day for inspiration and wisdom
- Read the introductions to the toolkits
- Come to Gathering 2 prepared to share initial thoughts about the six diocesan evangelization priorities

Gathering 2: Name and Explore the Priorities

Prayer – modeled after the prayer engaged by the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and emphasizing a posture of surrender to the Holy Spirit, periods of silent meditation, and spontaneity.

Diocesan priorities initial discussion

Between gathering “homework”

- Pray each day for inspiration and wisdom
- Listen to parishioner input
- Participants divvy up focus groups to ensure presence at each
- Review summaries from all focus groups
- Read survey report(s)

Between gathering activity: This process is designed to use the time between gathering two and three to listen to the parish (through focus groups and surveys). To allow sufficient time for this task, and the time it takes to collect, organize and review the information, be attentive to scheduling sufficient time between these two gatherings.

- Organize focus groups and survey communication.
- Schedule focus groups to ensure broadest participation.
- Consider after Masses on 2 consecutive Sundays.
- Designate facilitator and table leaders.
- Designate recorders.
- Designate person to synthesize/summarize all focus group notes.
- Distribute Survey (both digital and hard copy versions available) and communicate with parishioners to ensure participation.
- Survey is intended as an instrument to listen to the parishioners.
- Survey has been created and hosted by the Diocese to assist you; data will only be used to assist parish leadership in their discernment, and to track overall diocesan progress. Data will not be used by the Diocese to assess pastoral effectiveness of parish leadership.
- Digital survey link will be available and sent to each pastor by the end of May.
- In-bulletin/in-pew hard copy– will be available for download on the diocesan website by the end of May
- Digital remains the primary option, but hard copy is available for those who need it.
- Once you have determined your discernment meeting schedule, please communicate the date you need the data from the survey by emailing toolkits@dmdiocese.org.

Gathering 3: Appreciative Inquiry – Discover and Dream

- Prayer– modeled after the prayer engaged by the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and emphasizing a posture of surrender to the Holy Spirit, periods of silent meditation, and spontaneity.
- Instruction/Formation on Appreciative Inquiry
- Discover and Dream
- Between gathering “homework”
- Pray each day for insight and wisdom

Gathering 4: Appreciative Inquiry – Discern and Do

- Prayer– modeled after the prayer engaged by the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and emphasizing a posture of surrender to the Holy Spirit, periods of silent meditation, and spontaneity.
- Review of Appreciative Inquiry
- Discern and Do (process detailed below)

Gathering 1: Set the Stage Script

Before Gathering

Identify who is leading the gathering, as well as the two readers and a notetaker to document conversation.

Prayer (recommend 20 or more minutes)

Begin with a period of generous silence (may include spontaneous invocation of the Holy Spirit), reminding yourselves that God is always present with and among you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reader 1: A reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

In the first book, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While meeting with them, he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for “the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

When they had gathered together they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:1-8)

Silent Meditation (2-3 minutes)

Reader 2: From The Joy of the Gospel, paragraph 24:

“The Church which ‘goes forth’ is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast.”

Silent Meditation (2-3 minutes)

Questions for reflection and sharing:

What comes to mind as you think about your life as a disciple?

What strikes you as you reflect on life in your parish?

After a time of sharing, invite those present to offer prayers of praise, consolation, petition, or other requests of the Holy Spirit, using the group response, “Come, Holy Spirit” to each offering. Conclude with the Lord’s Prayer.

Set the Context: Read and discuss the Mission and Vision Statements of the Strategic Vision and Plan for the Diocese of Des Moines, using the questions for discussion as a springboard. If the group is larger, read and discuss in small groups and re-gather with time to share.

Mission Statement: Sowing God's Spirit

In the wake of his Resurrection, Jesus rouses us to become witnesses of true love who are moved as the Spirit wills to bear God's presence, healing compassion, and peace to a broken world. Sparked by the joy of the Gospel kindled in our own hearts, love turns fear to holy boldness as we listen and speak anointed words to persons who have grown lukewarm in their capacity to trust, and who find it hard to believe they are beautiful and beloved in God's sight. We bless and build up each other. We overcome forces of division by the Spirit's power to become one in Christ. Living by faith is the greatest adventure imaginable, for with God all things are possible. Sowing God's Spirit is our mission and a labor that never grows old, for we are fed by the daily bread of grace that God multiplies among us.

Question for Discussion:

What word or phrase strikes you? Why?

Vision Statement: Cultivating Connections in Christ

As we Sow God's Spirit in the world, we lean into our vision of cultivating connections in Christ. The seeds of love that we sow yield fruit as we discover Jesus. We are grafted by grace in relationships with Jesus and with one another, like a vine and branches. We form intimate bonds with Christ through the personal and collective experiences of (1) encounter, (2) friendship and (3) communion. Cultivating these connections in Christ is central to our vision as a people after God's own heart.

Encounter. Those who cross paths with Jesus in the Bible - such as the shepherds and Magi at Bethlehem, Simeon and Anna, the woman at the well, Zacchaeus, the apostles, the bleeding woman who touches Jesus' garment, the centurion at Calvary, the disciples on the road to Emmaus - foreshadow how our lives are forever changed when we encounter the Son of the heavenly Father. His gaze and his touch convey the truth that God cares about us. He does not condemn but calls us to follow him to the fullness of life.

Once we open the door of our hearts to a personal connection with Christ, it changes the way we encounter people and are able to accompany them along the path of life. Poverty of spirit becomes an attractive, beatific feature rather than a disease against which we fortify ourselves. Like the Good Samaritan, we recognize someone bruised and victimized by a lack of love, and offer generous service as any true neighbor does. The Spirit transforms our senses and hearts to view others as bearers of God's image, worthy of dignity and respect amid the sorrows and joys, trials and tragedies, and celebrations that life affords all of us.

Friendship. Jesus desires genuine friends who are ready to lay down their lives for one another just as he does for us. Christian love finds joy in doing the right thing, heedless of the cost. In his own experience, Jesus witnessed a school of marital friendship in the Nazareth home of Mary and Joseph. He experienced fraternal friendship with Martha, Mary and Lazarus, and he was known to be especially close to the apostles Peter, James, and John as they drew close to him and were converted before proclaiming the Gospel and performing miracles in his name.

Jesus is not simply the loving "giver" who pours out his body and blood, his very life for others. He shows us God's humility in not being afraid to share his "need" for us. God's truest friends, including saints such as St. Teresa of Calcutta, know that he still thirsts for souls to whom we are called to show love, to reveal that whatever we do for the hungry, naked, imprisoned, the vulnerable and least among us, we do for him. And in the process, these connections sown and sealed in the Spirit endure forever.

Communion. We live in a time saturated by "networks" and social connections produced by technology. How many of us are still searching for a place to belong, to feel that we are unconditionally loved and accepted as



we are? We do not need to digitally alter our image or our story. Jesus wants to incorporate our story into his story, which is more incredible than anything we could have imagined. God is revealed to be for all eternity a Trinity of persons perfect in love and relationship, united in being God and yet not a closed, gated community to which we cannot gain access. The Father sends his Son in the fullness of time so that we can participate in the communion of love who is God, thanks to Jesus becoming God-with-us, both human and divine in the wonder of the Incarnation. Jesus greatly desires to eat and drink with us as he did with disciples and the multitudes drawn around him. He then fulfills his desire to BECOME food and drink for us in the mysterious, miraculous gift of the Eucharist.

His sacramental presence in material stuff such as water, oil, bread and wine, and in persons who become the dwelling place of his Spirit, is the foundation of the community of persons called out of themselves to become sisters and brothers in Jesus' name. This community has its own name: the Church. In forming the Church, Jesus never imposes himself on others but proposes the way, truth, and life by which we realize our own hearts' desire. So, too, disciples of Jesus go out to echo the heavenly Father's invitation to a wedding feast where all are welcome, especially the poor and those relegated to the "peripheries" of our society. In poetic language, we identify Jesus as the Bridegroom who is joined to his bride, the Church, expressing the connections formed by Jesus' Risen Spirit, the loving friendships whose destination is heaven. There Mary shines radiantly among the multitude in God's presence who sing his praises with all the angels in the communion of saints.

Question for Discussion:

What is especially pertinent or meaningful in this vision statement as you consider the future of your parish?

Homework for Gathering 2:

- Pray each day for inspiration and wisdom
- Read the introductions to the toolkits
- Come to Gathering 2 prepared to share initial thoughts about the six diocesan evangelization priorities



For the Parish Leader: Gathering 2: Name and Explore Priorities Script

Before Gathering

Identify who is leading the gathering, as well as the two readers and a notetaker to document conversation.

Prayer (recommend 20 or more minutes)

Begin with a period of generous silence (may include spontaneous invocation of the Holy Spirit), reminding yourselves that God is always present with and among you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reader 1: A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Silent Meditation (2-3 minutes)

Reader 2: From The Joy of the Gospel, paragraph 24:

“Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy. Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. The Lord gets involved and he involves his own, as he kneels to wash their feet. He tells his disciples: ‘You will be blessed if you do this’ (Jn 13:17).

Silent Meditation (2-3 minutes)

Questions for reflection and sharing:

What comes to mind as you think about your life as a disciple?

What strikes you as you reflect on life in your parish?

After a time of sharing, invite those present to offer prayers of praise, consolation, petition, or other requests of the Holy Spirit, using the group response, “Come, Holy Spirit” to each offering. Conclude with the Lord’s Prayer.

Explore Priorities

As leaders, you have experience and insights into the life of your parish that help you to see the big picture and understand the interrelated nature of the many elements of parish life. In this session, explore the priorities that have been discerned for our Diocese through prayer and consultation. Share together your understanding of the importance of each priority, your experience of the priority in action in your parish, and examples that point to the priority as an area for future attention. Ask a recorder to capture the highlights of your discussion

on the worksheet provided. These notes will help you carry this discussion into the next session, in which you will synthesize your insights with the input received from parishioners through the survey and focus groups.

Create a culture of welcome and care: A welcoming parish is a reflection of Christian hospitality. Once we are welcomed, it is important to know we are cared for, that we matter to the life of the parish.

Invite people into an encounter with Jesus Christ: Jesus invites all of us to have a personal relationship with Him. The work of evangelization is an invitation into an encounter with Jesus which transforms us, our families, our parish, and our communities.

Accompany our youth into discipleship with Jesus Christ: Walking with youth means meeting them where they are. Our youth are interested in making connections with their peers and forming lasting relationships.

Engage our young adults into full participation: We seek to connect young adults with Jesus Christ, the Church as a welcoming Christian community, the mission of the Church in the world, and a peer community where faith is nurtured and strengthened.

Prepare disciples for the domestic Church: The family is placed at the heart of discipleship and mission. It is the privileged place for evangelization, catechesis, and spiritual growth.

Communicate our message more boldly and clearly: Good communication is at the core of helping people know and love God. It is the lynchpin in a thriving, active parish.

Take time to share initial thoughts about each Priority

What strikes you?

Why is this priority important?

What experience or example comes to mind of this priority in action in your parish?

What experience or example points to this as an area for future attention?

Homework for Gathering 3:

- Pray each day for inspiration and wisdom
- Listen to parishioner input
- Assist with focus groups as necessary
- Review summaries from all focus group
- Read survey data



Gathering 3: Appreciative Inquiry -- Discover, Dream Script

Before Gathering

Identify who is leading the gathering, as well as the two readers and a notetaker to document conversation.

Prayer (recommend 20 or more minutes)

Begin with a period of generous silence (may include spontaneous invocation of the Holy Spirit), reminding yourselves that God is always present with and among you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reader 1: A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and proclaimed to them, “You who are Jews, indeed all of you staying in Jerusalem. Let this be known to you, and listen to my words. These people are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘It will come to pass in the last days,’ God says, ‘that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. Indeed, upon my servants and my handmaids I will pour out a portion of my spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy. And I will work wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below: blood, fire, and a cloud of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the coming of the great and splendid day of the Lord, and it shall be that everyone shall be saved who calls on the name of the Lord.’ (Acts 2:14-21)

Silent Meditation (2-3 minutes)

Reader 2: From The Joy of the Gospel, paragraph 24:

“An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the ‘smell of the sheep’ and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be. It is familiar with patient expectation and apostolic endurance. Evangelization consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time.”

Silent Meditation (2-3 minutes)

Questions for reflection and sharing:

What comes to mind as you think about your life as a disciple?

What strikes you as you reflect on life in your parish?

After a time of sharing, invite those present to offer prayers of praise, consolation, petition, or other requests of the Holy Spirit, using the group response, “Come, Holy Spirit” to each offering. Conclude with the Lord’s Prayer.

Appreciative Inquiry Process:

Appreciative Inquiry is a method of planning that encourages leaders to consider what is already happening upon which they may build, what they can learn from others who have experienced growth or vitality in their organization, and how they may discern future steps together. The Appreciative process does not ignore the need for change but instead approaches situations from a positive perspective through which leaders develop strategies toward a positive and compelling vision for the future. Watch the video linked here for a brief introduction to Appreciative Inquiry. <https://aicommons.champlain.edu/learn/appreciative-inquiry-introduction/>

The five D's of Appreciative Inquiry:

1. Define – What is the topic of inquiry? – It is important to define the overall focus of the inquiry (what the system wants more of). Definition is used to clarify the area of work to be considered. In spite of being the starting point of the cycle, it's a recent addition – the 5Ds were originally the 4Ds, including discover, dream, discernment/design and delivery, which is focused on building a plan for the future. Definition defines the project's purpose, content, and what needs to be achieved. In this phase, the guiding question is, "What generative topic do we want to focus on together?"
 - For our purposes in this discernment process, defining the topic really focuses on WHY this process is necessary. Why is change needed? What greater purpose may be realized through the strategic priorities?
2. Discover – Appreciating the best of 'what is' – Discovery is based on a dialogue, as a way of finding 'what works'. It rediscovers and remembers the organization or community's successes, strengths and periods of excellence.
 - When we "discover" what is working in our parishes, we put a spotlight on areas of spiritual richness, potential, or growth. Discovery includes glimpses of future possibilities gleaned from others, such as what we hear in focus groups or surveys. Our listening also includes the areas that people identify for future attention; see step 4, discernment.
3. Dream – Imagining 'what could be' – Imagining uses past achievements and successes identified in the discovery phase to imagine new possibilities and envisage a preferred future. It allows people to identify their dreams for a community or organization; having discovered 'what is best'. They have the chance to project it into their wishes, hopes and aspirations for the future.
 - "Dreaming" about the vision for the future is essential in any planning process. This is especially true in pastoral planning, since we may otherwise be limited by what we know, what we are comfortable with, or the status quo. When we dream together, we name the future vision we hold out in front of ourselves for our faith community.
4. Discern/Design – Determining 'what should be' – Design brings together the stories from discovery with the imagination and creativity from dream. We call it bringing the 'best of what is' together with 'what might be', to create 'what should be – the ideal'.
 - We have discovered where we are - what we have upon which to build and areas of need, gaps in ministry. We have identified our vision for the future and can clearly and succinctly articulate it. Now, we begin to discern what is needed to bring the vision to life. What strategic priority most needs our attention at this time?
5. Do/Deliver– Creating 'what will be' – The fifth stage in the 5Ds process identifies how the design is delivered, and how it's embedded into groups, communities and organizations.
 - What will you do to address the strategic priority you have discerned as most important at this time?



Use the provided worksheet/chart for this exercise. Designate a recorder who will capture highlights in the chart.

Dream:

What are your hopes and dreams for your parish?

In a word or phrase, how would you describe your vision for your parish?

Discover:

What strengths or positive experiences did you discover in your discussions during Gathering 2?

What did you hear from the listening/input of parishioners?

What can you learn from previous experience in the parish and beyond it?

What challenges or obstacles do you face?

Homework for Gathering 4:

- Pray each day for inspiration and wisdom

Gathering 4: Appreciative Process 2 -- Discern, Do Script

Before Gathering

Identify who is leading the gathering, as well as the two readers and a notetaker to document conversation.

Prayer (recommend 20 or more minutes)

Begin with a period of generous silence (may include spontaneous invocation of the Holy Spirit), reminding yourselves that God is always present with and among you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reader 1: A reading from the holy Gospel according to St. Matthew

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them. When they saw him, they worshipped, but they doubted. Then Jesus approached and said to them, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:16-20)

Silent Meditation (2-3 minutes)

Reader 2: From The Joy of the Gospel, paragraph 24:

"Faithful to the Lord's gift, it also bears fruit. An evangelizing community is always concerned with fruit, because the Lord wants her to be fruitful. It cares for the grain and does not grow impatient at the weeds...He or she finds a way to let the word take flesh in a particular situation and bear fruits of new life, however imperfect or incomplete these may appear...Finally an evangelizing community is filled with joy; it knows how to rejoice always. It celebrates every small victory, every step forward in the work of evangelization."

Silent Meditation (2-3 minutes)

Questions for reflection and sharing:

What comes to mind as you think about your life as a disciple?

What strikes you as you reflect on life in your parish?

After a time of sharing, invite those present to offer prayers of praise, consolation, petition, or other requests of the Holy Spirit, using the group response, "Come, Holy Spirit" to each offering. Conclude with the Lord's Prayer.

Appreciative Inquiry:

Appreciative Inquiry is a method of planning that encourages leaders to consider what is already happening upon which they may build, what they can learn from others who have experienced growth or vitality in their organization, and how they may discern future steps together. The Appreciative process does not ignore the need for change but instead approaches situations from a positive perspective through which leaders develop strategies toward a positive and compelling vision for the future.

Discern: Identify first steps

Which priority (or priorities) will receive attention?

Is this an area of strengths upon which to build?

Is this an area in need of attention and intentional action?



Do:

Who will be involved in developing the plan?

How will this group function, who do they report to/consult?

What constraints or structure exist that will affect their work?

When should their initial draft plan be ready?

Designate a recorder who will capture highlights in chart