



Cultivating
Connections
in Christ

DIOCESE OF DES MOINES

Communicating the Gospel
Boldly & Clearly

PARISH TOOLKIT

Please
Shut down choir
microphone
During homily!
Thank you!

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Communicating the Gospel *Boldly & Clearly*

“Communication is the linchpin skill. If we can’t communicate, there can be no communion and no community. There can be no vision and no leadership. And good communication is about more than just using the right technology.”

MATT WARNER

Founder of Flocknote and author of “Why They Follow”

WHY HAVE A GOOD COMMUNICATIONS PLAN?

Good communication is critical for a thriving, active Catholic parish. The Diocese of Des Moines’ Communication Commission offers this toolkit to parishes to assist in creating and sustaining an effective communication plan that helps parishes cultivate connections in Christ.

A communication plan enables us to:

- Build and deepen relationships
- Make Jesus known and loved
- Increase parish vibrancy as active and joyful communities of faith
- Increase support of the parish mission
- Move from a maintenance approach to a mission approach in sharing the Good News

There are four key components to a good communication plan: Audience, Message, Measurement, and Tools.

PRAYER FOR THOSE WORKING IN DIOCESAN & PARISH COMMUNICATIONS

Holy Spirit, you blessed the first disciples with the power to spread God’s love throughout the world.

Give me a new power to proclaim your word through my own unique gifts and through the channels of clear communications.

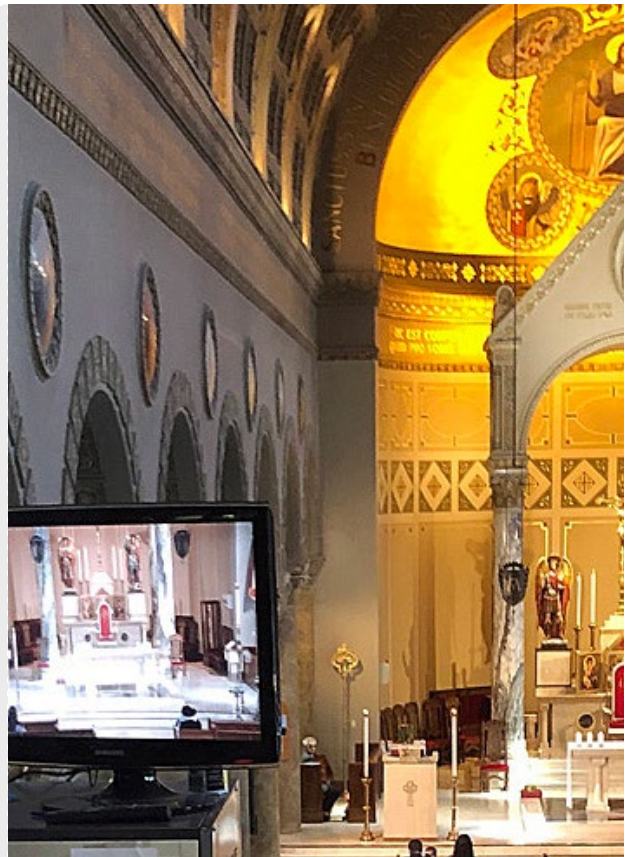
Make me willing to receive that word as it enters my daily life.

Bless all who use their talents in the field of communications.

Guide those who send out the message and those who receive it, so that all people may come to know your truth and be renewed by your love.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, Our Lord.

Amen!



AUDIENCE: WHO IS OUT THERE?

There are a number of ways to look at those you hope to reach.

First, understand that everyone is on their own faith journey, and each person is at a different point along the way. We want to invite people to move into a deeper connection with Christ and become disciples.

Some are encountering the Catholic faith for the first time or discerning whether they want to learn more. They may be dating a Catholic, attending a parish event, or searching for healing or greater meaning in their life.

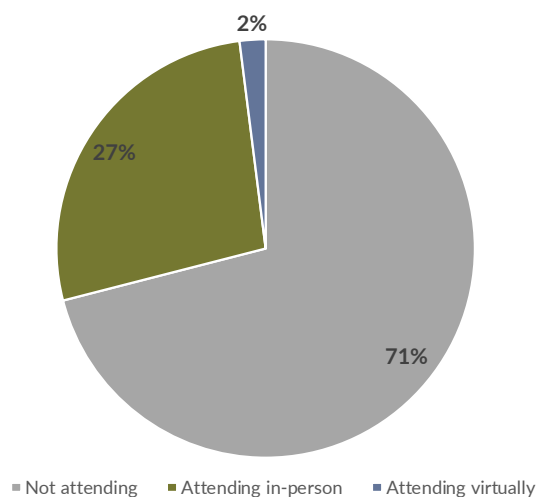
Some are interested in the Catholic faith and want to learn more. They might be attending Mass, asking questions, volunteering, joining a ministry or group, or participating in RCIA.

Some have made a commitment to deepen their faith. They may be participating in a Bible study or faith formation program, serving as a catechist, or volunteering at a local food pantry or other service.

Second, understand where they are – or aren't.

Are they Mass-goers? Only about 25 to 30 percent of registered parishioners attend Mass on any given weekend in the Diocese of Des Moines, according to an annual census called the October Count.

Are they inactive parishioners? They may be registered in a parish but not attending Mass on a regular basis. *The October Count would suggest that this is a large percentage of the Catholic population.* Many of them are people we already know.



Why are they not here? They may be homebound or ill, or caring for someone who is not mobile. Maybe they send their children to Catholic a school or religious education program but don't feel connected themselves. They may be "snowbirds" who are at the parish most of the year but go South during the winter. Perhaps they feel alienated by something someone said or did, or by some slight they felt during an experience with the parish. Maybe they simply fell out of the habit during the pandemic and just haven't started going again.

Are they members of the surrounding community? Those who live and work around the parish and in the greater community may be interested in various events, speakers, or gatherings occurring at the parish.

Are they former parishioners who have moved away? When the diocese created a short video on each of the churches of Shelby County for social media, many of the comments posted were from people whose families were from those parishes but had moved away. As demographics change and more families move from rural areas to cities, there may be a pool of people who still feel a connection to their home parish even if they no longer attend Mass there.

Third, look at your audience based on age or family status..

Are you trying to reach all the generations represented in your parish: Children and teens, young adults, single adults and young married couples, families with young children, empty nesters and retired people? Each generation and family configuration has its own characteristics and preferences for how they like to receive communication.

MESSAGE: WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SAY?

MISSION

If someone asked what your parish’s mission is, could you answer in just a couple of sentences? Author, blogger and founder of the e-communication system Flocknote,ii Matthew Warner, said, “Churches must lead their people with a clear vision and purpose. If we do not communicate a direction, mission and purpose, people will not respond.”iii.

CONNECTION

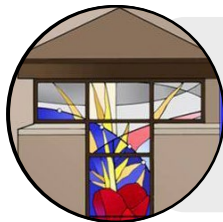
Our vision of cultivating connections in Christ is needed in our society today. The 2023 U.S. Surgeon General’s report *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*³ focused on the healing effects of social connection and community. “The keys to human connection are simple, but extraordinarily powerful,” wrote Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy. Our parishes, our sacraments, and our faith offer healing, human connection, and peace.

STORIES

One way to deliver our message is through stories. The Directory for Catechesis,iv which explains how to present the Catholic faith, says, “The art of storytelling, which uses the principles of rhetoric and a language of its own adopted from marketing, is considered by the young as more convincing and compelling than the traditional forms of discourse. The language that has the greatest hold on the digital generation is that of the story, rather than that of argumentation” (p. 217). The more stories we share of how faith is transformative, the more we help people come to know and love Jesus.

The U.S. bishops’ strategic plan^v notes that we must “communicate more effectively how faith transforms lives” in our efforts to evangelize.

Here are two excellent examples of how our parishes are doing it.



OUR LADY’S IMMACULATE HEART, ANKENY, IA

Our Lady’s Immaculate Heart Parish in Ankeny has a blog in which a variety of parishioners share their encounters with grace. You can find their blog at www.olih.org

SACRED HEART, WEST DES MOINES, IA

Sacred Heart Parish in West Des Moines shares a story each month of parishioners sharing their real-life faith experiences, grace, and their relationship with God. These are shared in the monthly bulletin as well as on the website. You can find them online at www.sacredheartwdm.org/stories-from-the-heart



Below is an example of Sacred Heart's "Stories from the Heart" series that is published monthly in their parish bulletin.

SACRED HEART CATHOLIC CHURCH

WEEK OF OCTOBER 13, 2024

5

Stories from the Heart



Everyone has a story. In Stories from the Heart, we share inspiring, true stories from Sacred Heart parishioners: the real-life experiences that have deepened their faith, filled them with grace, and led them to a closer relationship with Jesus Christ and His church.

Erin and Ellie Hannah – Coming Full Circle With the Rosary

When parishioner Erin Hannah started taking her two girls to Monday night rosary seven years ago, she had no idea she was planting the seeds of a family business. Parker, now fifteen, was in second grade and Ellie, now twelve, in Kindergarten. Husband Brenden had started RCIA, and Erin found that praying the rosary every Monday with her daughters and "all these amazing women and men" meant a lot. "We just loved it, loved the people, and that kind of started to help us get a little bit more involved in Sacred Heart Church."

As the girls grew older and got busier, their attendance on Mondays tapered off, but their love for the rosary didn't fade. Matters took an interesting turn when Ellie's passion for crafting really took off. She had a talent for making things with her hands, especially bracelets, and Erin couldn't help but see a potential opportunity for her daughter. "At some point along the line, I just had this idea that maybe Ellie could make rosaries."

Ellie wanted to give it a try, and with a little help from YouTube and some specialty parts from Divine Treasures, she was soon crafting beautiful rosaries at the dining room table. Her first completed project warranted a special return to the Monday night group. "The first rosary that I made, we brought it to one of those (Monday night) rosaries and everyone just loved it."

Word got out and orders started pouring in, mostly from around the parish. "It really started with Ellie doing all of it," Erin says, but with a growing list of orders, mother and daughter had to team up to complete the work. In their first year, the fledgling company—artfully named Crown of Roses—donated two of their rosaries to the Sacred Heart Auction and also managed to fill a large order for a group of nuns in Kenya, crafting ten custom rosaries as a gift to the nuns from a local family. Future plans include an Etsy shop, annual donations to charity, and a line of "unique Catholic products that people can get excited about."

The two founders want to stay focused on making beautiful products that inspire people to pray, and as mother and daughter look ahead, they like to keep in mind how the journey began. "I don't think we would be doing this without that Monday night rosary," says Erin. "It's almost like a full circle the way I think of it, starting to go to the rosary when she was so little, and now she's making rosaries. For me this is awesome."



Ellie Hannah at work on a new rosary



Erin Hannah with daughter Ellie

Stories from the Heart can be found on our Sacred Heart Church website at sacredheartwdm.org/stories-from-the-heart or by following the QR code. Please send comments/questions about Stories from the Heart to [Andrea Vij at realfaithstories@gmail.com](mailto:Andrea.Vij@realfaithstories@gmail.com).



QUESTIONS ABOUT MESSAGING

1. Do the various events and activities of the parish connect to the mission of the parish? Do you help people understand the connection?
2. Do you plan opportunities for growth in faith and for fellowship? Are faith sharing or service groups that people can join? Is it easy to find a contact email or phone number for someone in these groups?
3. Do you share stories of hope? Of possibility? Of successes? In a world that promotes hate and distrust, parishes must speak and share the truth, love, and compassion of Christ.
4. Do you invite people to Eucharist and offer them opportunities to become Eucharistic people through service in the community?

RESOURCES FOR MESSAGING

Not sure where to begin with messaging about our faith? Here are some resources.



YOUCAT FOUNDATION

YOUCAT Foundation offers catechism, an introduction to the Bible, social doctrine of the Church, and an introduction to prayer for young people. This is an outgrowth of the New Evangelization, which focuses on teaching the faith through traditional and digital media. www.youcat.org



ASCENSION APP

Ascension App offers Bible study with Catechism in a Year, or Bible in a Year featuring Father Mike Schmitz, Jeff Cavins and other experts. Parishioners can take part individually, or gather in small groups to discuss chapters and their progress. Free. <https://ascensionpress.com/pages/ascension-app>



HALLOW APP

Hallow App encourages the habit of prayer in English, Spanish, Polish, and Portuguese. Free 14-day trial; subscription \$9.99/month. <https://hallow.com>



CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING 101

Catholic Relief Services offers a 7-part video series, discussion guide, lesson plans in English and Spanish. <https://www.crs.org/resource-center/CST-101>

MEASUREMENT: HOW DO YOU GAUGE SUCCESS?

There are several ways you can measure communication. From there, you can set goals for improvement.

PARISHIONER SURVEYS

Ask your parishioners directly how they would like to receive information from your parish. A service such as SurveyMonkeyvi can give you valuable insight fairly inexpensively. Responses are likely to vary greatly. Different generations tend to prefer receiving communication in different ways. Young families generally prefer to receive communication digitally (email or text) while others may prefer the printed bulletin. Use the survey to adjust how you deliver your messages, then conduct a follow-up survey 18 to 24 months later to see if parishioners indicate greater satisfaction with how they receive communication.

A service such as Disciple Maker Index^{vii} can do a broad assessment of all aspects of a parish's spiritual life. St. John and Paul Parish in Altoona began such an assessment in early 2024.

FOCUS GROUPS

Consider gathering groups of parishioners to get their direct feedback. Ideas for questions:

- How do they learn about information from the parish?
- Do they wish there was another way they could get information?
- Have they missed communication about events or projects they wish they'd have known about?
- If money were no object, what would they do to improve parish communications? What holds them back from becoming the parish they want to be?

Conduct a few other focus groups 18 to 24 months later to see if people are more satisfied with communication.

These questions can and should be adapted to fit the needs of your parish.

OTHER MEASUREMENT OPTIONS

- *How many people are registered in parish? Does the number go up over time?*
- *Of the registered parishioners, about how many come to worship/prayer opportunities? How many participate in religious education? In men's/women's groups? Does participation go up after a year or two?*
- *How many bulletins are taken on any given weekend? Would they reach more people if they were available both electronically and on paper?*
- *Does the parish make use of social media? How many people follow the parish on social media? Do you have more followers after 12 months?*
- *How many people engage with your social media platforms? Do more people interact with your social media posts after 12 months?*
- *What percentage of your registered parishioners have shared their email addresses with you? Can you do a campaign to collect more email addresses so you can send information to more people?*
- *Do you formally or informally track letters or calls of gratitude? Do you track letters or calls of complaint, confusion, or frustration?*

PARISH STAFF AND MINISTRY LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Contact the diocesan Communications Office or Evangelization & Mission Office to get a detailed PowerPoint on how to connect messaging to various points on the faith journey.

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES FOR VIBRANT PARISHES & CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Gather your communication team to watch “Communications Strategies for Vibrant Parishes and Catholic Schools,”^{viii} a video from Boston College’s Church in the 21st Century. Discuss how you can apply their ideas for communication to your parish.

PARISH COMMUNICATION GROUPS

Join the new parish communication group. Contact Anne Marie Cox at 515-237-5057 or acox@dmdiocese.org.

PARISH WEBSITES

While there are services out there that can be used to create a simple website, consult Alexis Nicholson, our digital evangelist at anicholson@dmdiocese.org. She can work with you to ensure that you have the best URL, a search engine optimization strategy that helps people find your site, and a responsive design so the website can be easily viewed on both desktop computers and mobile devices.

CANVA

Use interesting and artful graphics in your communications. Canva^{ix} offers tutorials on creating graphics and free access to high-quality templates for nonprofits.

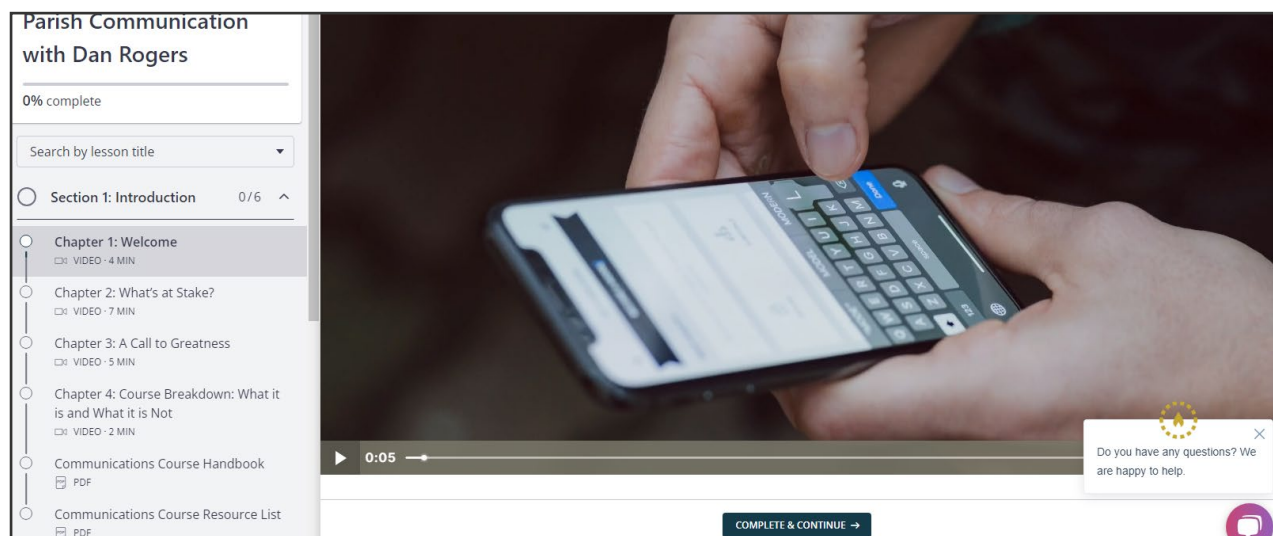
CHRIS SNIDER WORKSHOPS

Drake University professor Chris Snider offers workshops that will help with digital communication and evangelization strategies. They are good for people with limited knowledge of digital tool, and offer hands-on learning.

<https://chrissniderdesign.com/blog/about/workshops/>

PARISH COMMUNICATION BY DAN ROGERS

Looking to take your parish communications to the next level to inspire faith, invite disciples, and tell great stories to increase engagement? Let Dan guide you to clarity around effective parish communications through his new 3 hour course, perfect for parish staff members and pastors alike. You can find this free course at www.reviveparishes.com



The screenshot shows a video player interface for a course titled "Parish Communication with Dan Rogers". The course is currently 0% complete. A search bar is available for finding lessons by title. The course is divided into sections, with "Section 1: Introduction" (0/6) selected. Under this section, several chapters are listed: "Chapter 1: Welcome" (4 min video), "Chapter 2: What's at Stake?" (7 min video), "Chapter 3: A Call to Greatness" (5 min video), and "Chapter 4: Course Breakdown: What it is and What it is Not" (2 min video). There are also two PDF resources: "Communications Course Handbook" and "Communications Course Resource List". The video player shows a play button and a progress bar at 0:05. A "COMPLETE & CONTINUE" button is visible at the bottom. A chat bubble in the bottom right corner asks, "Do you have any questions? We are happy to help."

BEST PRACTICES

WHAT TOOLS SHOULD WE USE?

We often say, “Let’s to get this event out on Facebook or in the bulletin.” We tend to think of the tools first. A better approach to communication is to consider the message and the audience you want to target, then pick the tool that best fits.

The Catholic Leadership Institutex recommends three simple points to creating a successful parish communication plan: Repetition, simple messages, and multiple media.

REPETITION

Let people know about an event a few weeks before it happens. Repeat your message over the next several weekends.

Note: For longer events (like overnight retreats and conferences) you may want to start messaging several months ahead of the event to give people time to save the date in their calendar.

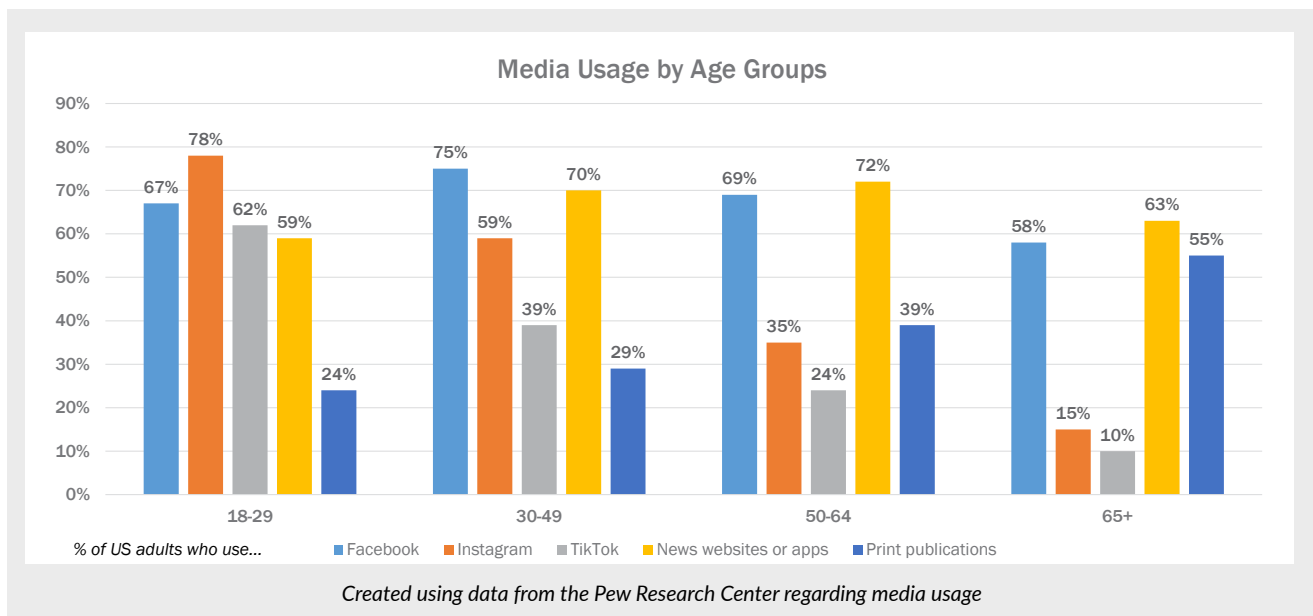
SIMPLE MESSAGES

Convey information simply. Avoid church jargon. Information should be written at an eighth-grade reading level or below. Several of our churches frequently repeat the phrase, “God is good. All of the time.” It’s used as a call and response during worship and can be seen in some bulletins. It’s a good example of both simple & repetitive messaging.

Ask yourself, “Would Pete and Paula in the pew understand this?”, “Would middle-school and high-school youth understand?”

MULTIPLE MEDIA

It is no longer the case that a single announcement in the parish bulletin is a sufficient means of sharing information. People today receive information in different ways. We need to use multiple communication vehicles to get our message out to as many people as possible. This includes using your bulletin, pulpit announcements, flyers on the bulletin board, posting on social media, and including events in newsletters to parishioners.



TOOLS WE RECOMMEND

The Diocese of Des Moines highly recommends each parish have at least the following communication tools in place.

WEEKLY BULLETIN

First and foremost, invite people to the many opportunities to worship and to serve. Share your parish mission, coming events, messages of success and challenges. Provide contact information for the parish, the web address for the parish website, Mass times, and reconciliation times.

Looking for an upgrade or refresh on your bulletin? Here are companies that print parish bulletins:

- LPi – Integrated Parish Communications: <https://www.4lpi.com/church-bulletins>
- In Des Moines, The Big Red Q is a print shop on Keo Way that prints a parish bulletin.

A PARISH WEBSITE

Each parish needs its own mobile-friendly website with easy-to-find information: Mass times; reconciliation times; location of the church, pastor's name; parish contact information including a phone number and an email address, and an online-giving option.

- Do you need to talk to someone about a new site or the functionality of your site? Contact Alexis Nicholson, diocesan digital evangelization specialist, at anicholson@dmdioocese.org or 515-237-5054.
- The diocese can provide a simple, contemporary-looking website for the cost of the domain name (about \$40). The diocesan Communications Office will pay this fee for the first year. This is a Google site that has limited capacity but works well for parishes that want a simple, fairly static site.
- Several parishes in our diocese use eCatholic^{xi} for their websites including Ss. John and Paul in Altoona and Ss. Peter and Paul in Atlantic. All parishes in the Archdiocese of Dubuque use eCatholic. This service provides a basic website with options that you can add based on a parish's need and funding.
- Online giving: The pandemic taught us how important it is for parishes to have an option for online giving. If it too expensive to set up this function on the current parish website, talk to Sue McEntee at the Catholic Foundation of Southwest Iowa (smcentee@cfswia.org or 515-237-5044). They can set up an online giving mechanism and provide the link for you to add to your website for free.

AT LEAST ONE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM

Facebook continues to be the most widely-used platform across all demographics, so it is recommended that parishes at least have an active Facebook profile.

Catholic Social Media, a service launched by the diocese in the summer of 2023, provides easy set-up, tech-support, and digital content.. Contact the diocesan Communications Office for information.

The Diocese of Des Moines also recommends each parish use these communication tools.

A WEEKLY EMAIL OR NEWSLETTER

A weekly (or bi-weekly) email or newsletter is an excellent way to reach parishioners, both those who attend Mass and those who are registered but do not attend Mass.

- Include a digital pdf file of the parish bulletin; a friendly invitation to participate in upcoming events; the pastor's column, reflection or homily, a request for prayers for the sick and recently deceased; or any information that didn't make it into the bulletin.
- Consider using a service such as Mail Chimp, Constant Contact, or Flocknote^{xii} for group emails. When a single sender emails a large number of addresses it often is considered spam by email providers and can result in your email list being blocked. It's easier to use an email service than to get off that blacklist. *Note: Flocknote allows parishioners to choose how they want to receive information, including email or text messaging. Christ the King Parish in Des Moines and St. Francis of Assisi Parish in West Des Moines both use this service as their main vehicle for direct communication to parishioners.*
- Limit each entry in a newsletter to a few lines of text accompanied by a photo and a link to more information on the parish website.
- Don't overload people's inboxes with too many messages or they will ignore the messages or click the unsubscribe button.

BULLETIN BOARDS

Don't underestimate the power of a simple bulletin board in a gathering space. These can range from digital messages on television screens to simple, colorful posters tacked onto a bulletin board. Place these in gathering areas and places where parents take their children who need to leave Mass temporarily.

COLLABORATION WITH YOUR PARISH SCHOOL

Consider collaborating with your Catholic school by sharing information in each other's communications.



ADDITIONAL TOOLS TO CONSIDER

RADIO

Iowa Catholic Radio, which covers much of central Iowa, and Spirit Catholic Radio, which covers much of western Iowa, reach Catholics in our diocese who want to know more about the faith.

- Iowa Catholic Radio accepts paid advertising, and is open to broadcasting public service announcements (PSAs). The network has a community events calendar on its website. Ask to have your event listed there.
<https://iowacatholicradio.com/events/>
- Spirit Catholic Radio accepts paid advertising, and is open to broadcasting PSAs. The network has a community calendar that any parish can use to promote its events.
<https://spiritcatholicradio.com/events-2/>

DIRECT MAIL

Old-fashioned mail slipped into our mailboxes is still a viable way to reach people. Everyone likes a good mail day. While some generations may not check their mailboxes frequently, others look forward to a hard-copy magazine, a birthday card, or postcards.

Try sending a postcard to all registered parishioners inviting them to Mass (especially around Christmas and Easter) or special events (Advent or Lenten opportunities). Maybe include a line where people can write down a special prayer intention and invite them to drop the postcard in the collection basket so the faith community can pray for those intentions.

HANDWRITTEN NOTES

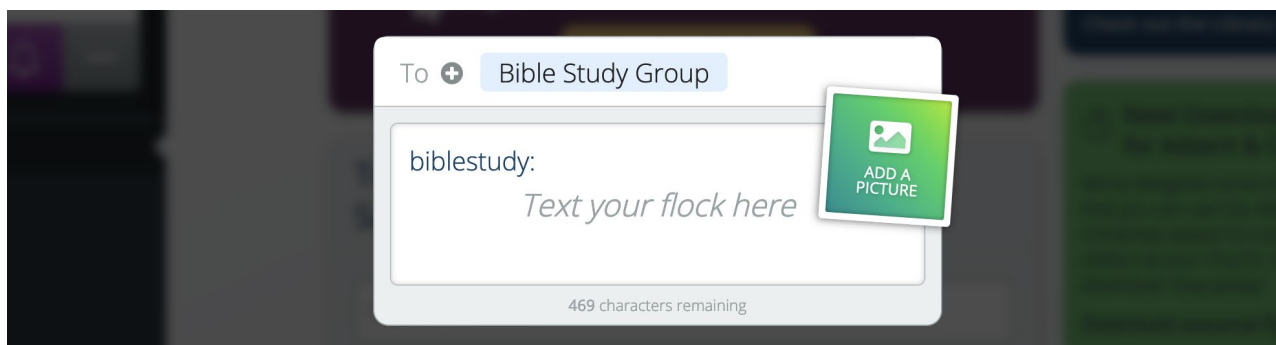
People appreciate it when someone takes the time to jot a little note in a card or write a short letter. During the pandemic, some parishes asked volunteers to become pen pals with people in assisted living and nursing homes. Why save that just for a worldwide emergency? Why do that only for those in nursing homes? A new mother might appreciate knowing that her parish is praying for her. A newly married couple or parents of a newly baptized child might appreciate a follow-up note

PHONE CALLS

We learned during the pandemic that parishes using a phone tree helped parishioners feel connected and cared for.

TEXT MESSAGES

There are services that will send out text messages to parishioners. This could be helpful, for example, for the morning Mass regulars in the winter, when weather might cause Mass to be cancelled. Flocknote is a service that allows people to choose how they want to receive messages from their parish, and texting is an option.



Example of the text message generator available in FlockNote

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites and Webinars

3 Rules for Effective Communication, a thirty-minute video from eCatholic on simple rules for effective communication. <https://ecatholic.com/blog/3-rules-for-effective-communication>

Introduction to Catholic Social Media, recorded Zoom call with Prenger Solutions introducing Catholic Social Media. Passcode: 7mK8FCC^

https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/U1sQl6NvsJ505ZzhbMTuuc1w8RaFHnEWe8mpvhgMQ0NPFPRLqldmKjGJLqo3VFkA.2SrUfVS5hEU_m2Lq

Books and Articles

How do Iowans use social media?, See this 2023 study by Blue Compass that focuses on local social media trends. <https://www.bluecompass.com/blog/iowa-social-media-survey>

Why They Follow, by Matthew Warner, founder of the e-communication tool Flocknote

Paolo Ruffini: Social media has the power to build a better world, Vatican story on how social media can help build a better world. www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2023-05/paolo-ruffini-use-social-media-to-build-a-better-world.html

USCCB Strategic Plan, [https://www.usccb.org/resources/2021-24%20Strategic%20Plan%20Thematic%20Framework%20\(004\).pdf](https://www.usccb.org/resources/2021-24%20Strategic%20Plan%20Thematic%20Framework%20(004).pdf)

REFERENCES

- i *Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg, Communications Prayer for those working in Diocesan and Parish Communications*, <https://www.dosp.org/communications/popes-prayer-for-communications/>
- ii *Flocknote is a software product that facilitates communications with parishioners*. <https://flocknote.com/our-mission/>
- iii “*Flocknote Founder Offers Communication Tips for Reaching the Faithful*,” *National Catholic Register*, Lent 2024 <https://www.ncregister.com/interview/flocknote-founder-matthew-warner-on-communication>
- iv www.hhs.gov/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory
- v *Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, Directory for Catechesis, 2020, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC*
- vi [www.usccb.org/resources/2021-24%20Strategic%20Plan%20Thematic%20Framework%20\(004\).pdf](http://www.usccb.org/resources/2021-24%20Strategic%20Plan%20Thematic%20Framework%20(004).pdf)
- vii <https://www.surveymonkey.com/>
- viii <https://www.catholicleaders.org/disciple-maker-index>
- ix <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgBdEG156f8&t=362s>
- x <https://www.canva.com/>
- xi <https://www.catholicleaders.org/>
- xii *eCatholic.com*
- xiii <https://mailchimp.com/>, <https://www.constantcontact.com/>, <https://flocknote.com/>