

AFFIRMING, WELCOMING AND ENGAGING

AWE

St. Ladislav Parish

Westlake, Ohio

The statistics are frightening: church membership is declining, there are fewer priests, and we have an aging clergy. In a typical Catholic parish, 30% are Actively Engaged, 30% are Uninvolved, and 40% are Actively Disengaged. That means 70% of the membership is not engaged in the life of the parish. It is truly a crisis. What can we do? No, what must be done - now?

The answer came in the AWE process, which is an acronym for Affirming, Welcoming and Engaging. AWE has become a compass, a rudder, and a way of life at St. Ladislav Parish on the west side of Cleveland, Ohio. Our Pastor, Fr. Donald Snyder, calls it “a paradigm shift that we as a parish are committed to for the long term.” We are doing strategic planning in a church. We ask ourselves at every turn or decision, will this create engagement? We firmly believe that “Belonging leads to Believing.” People come to church today because they want to belong somewhere. It is up to the parish leaders to nurture our parishioners’ sense of belonging and emotional commitment as well as to make them feel not just welcomed, but also wanted and valued.

Our journey began in 2012 when our Pastor and a few others evaluated the Institute of School and Parish Development’s (ISPD) AWE Program. In early 2013, we committed ourselves to the yearlong training program with a dozen other neighboring parishes. After organizing our Core Team, we conducted a survey of over 800 members of our parish. The results were quite revealing. At first, we thought we were pretty good but could be much better. But then after further analysis, we realized we mostly received surveys from the 30% that attended mass regularly so responses were biased. How can we engage the 70% disengaged of our parish? We randomly invited parishioners that were largely disengaged to meetings to ask them how we could be more engaging. Surprisingly, people showed up and provided valuable input in these small group meetings. We then organized several People Engagement Teams that met three times to sort through all of the suggestions and data; from there we developed a plan of action. Throughout this process, the absolute key to success was the unwavering commitment by our Pastor. Without that commitment, the process would have been another consultant’s fancy named program that would have faded over time and not made meaningful change happen within the fabric of the parish. By the end of 2013, we had identified five key challenges and under each challenge, four or five strategies or action ideas to help accomplish that specific challenge.

Now the real work began. The implementation of the four or five initiatives in our strategies identified should result in our real measure of success. The key to success in any endeavor is execution. Below are a handful of the many new initiatives, ministries, or programs started over the last year and a half:

- Revised our sign up form for our annual Parish Fair which helped discern one's gifts and talents.
- Revamped our New Parishioner Welcome Procedure to include a personal invitation to get involved in the church early on and a New Parishioner dinner.
- Started a Parishioner Spotlight section in the Bulletin to recognize parishioner accomplishments.
- Created an Engagement Office.
- Started Name Tag Sunday, so now when we greet someone we can do so by name.
- Expanded the Sunday Socials, coffee and donuts, from a few times a year to almost every weekend after each Mass.
- Created a Phone Ministry, called Father's Phoners, where we call every parishioner four times a year to invite them to special events at church.
- Created a team to expand our information technology to improve communications.
- Installed a state of the art system to stream live mass or other functions at church over the internet.
- Restarting a quarterly parish newsletter to be mailed or emailed to all parishioners.
- Developed several new social events with the goal to create engagement.
- Revised our Parish website to be more user friendly.

How are we doing? In a recent new parishioner welcoming dinner, one new parishioner said, "St. Ladislav is one of the best kept secrets." No, we do not want to be a secret. That's a challenge in itself. But, it is being one of the best that may tell it all. Membership is increasing. Signups for the over 60 ministries or groups is up over 10% from last year. New ministries are being created. Church attendance and giving is up. St. Ladislav is becoming a more dynamic and vibrant parish that's focused on "belonging leads to believing."