

St. John the Evangelist Parish Synod Narrative - Evaluation Questions for Parishes

The staff names and titles below correspond to the various chapter breaks in the SJE Synod Reflection and Plan video. The narrative response is based on the Evaluation Questions for Parishes found in the *Synod What's Next* pdf and are indicated as such below.

For a link to the video, visit: stjohnparish.org/synod-2022.

Fr. Sammie Maletta - Pastor

At St. John the Evangelist, we have a simple mission statement, “Be Disciples; Make Disciples”. We try to act intentionally, with this simple phrase always at the front of our minds, as we go about our daily work and in planning for the future. Narrowing our focus on being disciples who make disciples helps us ensure that everything we do supports this critical mission that Jesus has expressly given to us in Matthew 28:18-20. Activities or programs that don’t serve this mission may exist at SJE, but they are not a focus for our parish or staff.

(Question A9)

We have been blessed to have a constant spirit of renewal in our parish. We ask for God’s grace to do what the Spirit calls us to do, and we are not afraid to tear things apart and rebuild them in order to continually improve. By way of example, ALPHA is the primary tool we use for evangelization and it has proven effective; however, we have identified areas that need improvement and are in the process of completely revamping our Alpha program to ensure that participants have a transformative experience. Another example is our process for discipleship. It is not enough to say we are disciples who make disciples but we discerned that we would also need a clear plan or “process” that people can follow, step by step, to become disciples who make disciples. We have our “process” posted all over the narthex of our main church. Now with some experience and growth under our belt as a mission driven parish, we are in the process of re-evaluating and re-formulating our “process.” We’ll share the new process with our leaders at our Leadership Summit this August and with the wider parish during a homily series. New signage and media support will also be key components of this action plan.

We believe the Holy Spirit is working in a profound and active way here. About ten years ago, I came to the realization that, as a Church, we could not continue to function by just keeping things going. We were missing the point of our existence and were not fulfilling our mission. Our parish partners were not becoming missionary disciples. After studying and reading multiple books on this subject, we got involved with Amazing Parish and Divine Renovation,

organizations that are focused on helping parishes make disciples. We also invested in working with a coach, Ron Huntley, who was originally from Divine Renovation.

(Questions A7 and B5)

Ron has helped us to see that we cannot grow ministries and services by simply depending on clergy and staff to lead everything. In order to have the capacity to continue to grow in our mission, we have to build lay leaders who feel ownership for our mission rather than people who are just “volunteering”. We started this initiative with our parish staff. We have completely restructured the way we run our Leadership Team meetings, which has made our meetings exponentially more effective. We’ve used tools such as APEST and Gallup Strength Finder to help staff understand the ministerial and work styles of other team members and aid in developing a culture of trust and cooperation. We have a monthly Spiritual Staff meeting that focuses on developing our team members to Be Disciples as well as developing them as leaders. Our next step will be to hold Leadership summits with all leaders in our parish three times a year. The goal will be to help our leaders feel connected and invested in by parish staff.

In fact, in preparing this document, we met with two bodies in our parish that exemplify leadership. We brought together my Leadership Team, consisting of Father Declan and various staff members who oversee and hold key roles in the areas of Administration, Media, Worship Evangelization, Service and Human / Parishioner Resources. In addition to this team, we also consulted with our Vision and Mission Team. The V/M team is a group of highly involved lay leaders within our parish who represent various ministries as well as bringing professional experience in a variety of disciplines including law, finance, business administration and facilities. One of our team members is also in the Diaconate. Finally, each ministry head was asked to read through a draft of our narrative and to make comments, edits and suggestions before we finalized anything. We chose this approach to ensure a well rounded and comprehensive plan with many voices contributing to this vision.

(Question A8)

Everything we are doing to cultivate mission and leaders takes financial resources and so instead of using a “time, talent and treasures” model, we are calling people to go deeper by developing a personal relationship with Jesus, taking leadership roles and learning how to sacrificially give. The success is shown in our CSA and collection as well as by regular Sunday giving. My recent CSA homily was about helping people connect their faith to their generosity. Afterwards, a parishioner came up to me and said, “Father, I was so inspired by your homily that I’m doubling my CSA this year.”

Fr. Declan McNicholas - Associate Pastor

(Questions A2, B2, B3)

One of the first things I noticed about SJE was how welcoming our parishioners are. We have 6-9 greeters per Mass, so every person entering the Church is greeted by 2 or 3 different people in the Narthex. We want everyone who comes here to feel the love of Jesus even before they enter the main body of the church. We also have a Hospitality Desk that is manned by a member of our parish staff at every Mass so that anyone can get questions answered, and even register to be a parishioner, on the spot. We also have Sacred Grounds every Sunday after each Mass, and our Narthex is filled with people talking and hanging out while they have coffee and a doughnut. At the end of Mass, we give parishioners the “Donut Challenge” question. They are encouraged to find someone they don’t know and ask the Donut Challenge question as a way to meet more people within the parish. I thought all these things were great, but as I got more involved in our Leadership meetings, I realized that they were very intentional. At St. John, we have a clear focus in realizing that on any given Sunday, there may be people with us who have never been in a Church before and to whom we have an opportunity to evangelize. Because of the Shrine we get thousands of visitors every year. We want to show them outrageous hospitality and be an irresistible church. Our challenge is regularly recruiting the type of person who exemplifies this vision of hospitality and in monitoring and training our greeters. Since the initial Synod we have made significant progress in this area, however we have a way to go before we get to our goal of outrageous hospitality. This is one of our Synod goals.

We start each Mass by welcoming all visitors, especially those who may not be Catholic. We try to make them feel comfortable by telling them we understand it can be confusing when to sit or stand but explain that they can follow along via the prompts on the screens. Our school principal told me that they recently brought a friend who was not Catholic to Mass. After our welcome message, she said she felt their friend visibly relax, and she understood then why we repeat it each and every Mass. At Communion, we invite people who aren’t Catholic or not in the state of grace to come forward for a blessing from a member of the clergy.

Sometimes when we have crying babies in Church, Father Maletta will stop and say, “Listen to that beautiful sound. Those children are the future of our Church.” We’ve tried to flip the normal model of “Behave, Believe, Belong” to “Belong, Believe, Behave”. We feel that our first step in evangelizing is for people to feel that they belong here no matter who they are or what they look like. Once they know they belong, we can help to lead them to believe. When people believe and become disciples, it naturally follows that they will want to behave in the way Jesus wants us to behave.

We’ve talked a lot about how we evangelize within our Church walls, but we also strive to evangelize in everything we do and to help our parishioners to evangelize in their daily lives. Our principal tool for reaching those beyond our walls is our Alpha program.

Louis Cain - P.A. Relational Ministry

(Question B2)

Our parishioners are encouraged to invite people in their lives, especially those who may be unchurched or fallen away to our eleven week Alpha program. We give out business card sized invite cards with all of the information about the upcoming Alpha that people can give to friends, family or even their bank teller! We also heavily promote Alpha through signs, banners, social media and video shorts.

Alpha is a low pressure way to get people engaged in discussing matters of faith. Alpha meets weekly and all the participants share a meal, watch a video on the big questions surrounding faith and participate in small group discussions. We've had over 800 guests go through Alpha and over 50 non Catholics attend to date. We even have online Alpha and have had participants from as far away as Canada, Arizona, Arkansas, and Florida. Fifty percent of our last session participants were invited by a former Alpha alumni. We realize that we can make Alpha even more effective and are in the process of revamping what we have been doing to include a focus on recruiting and training Alpha team members, adding a Holy Spirit retreat weekend and implementing Connect groups. We especially want to increase the number of non-Catholic and fallen Catholics who attend.

Almost all those entering our RCIA program are coming from our Alpha program and because our RCIA was run only during specific times of the year, we decided to change to a year round program for people who are interested in learning more about the Catholic faith. Maybe they are people who come to us in May or who finish Alpha and want to go deeper. We wanted there to be a way for people to learn and discern, so we started, "Discovering Catholicism". Discovering Catholicism meets once a month. It is a place to grow in your relationship with God, build community, and listen to people's experience of being Catholic. It is focused on developing "heart knowledge" of God before we get into the heavier "head knowledge" in RCIA.

We look for opportunities to bring Jesus to others in whatever we do. For example, our Oktoberfest is attended by people from all over Northwest Indiana and Illinois. We decided to host an Encounter Night at our Day Chapel right in the middle of the Oktoberfest grounds. An Encounter Night is an awesome evening where we have prayer, praise and worship music and a testimonial. We had greeters outside inviting people to light a candle and come in to join us. One little boy came in with his grandma, and I heard him say, "So, this is what the inside of a Church looks like?" That's an evangelization moment! Our Praise Band will play at our summer festival. Maybe someone in the crowd will decide to come check out a Mass because they enjoyed the music. That's an evangelization moment. When people come to our food pantry in need, our team prays with them. That's an evangelization moment. We are constantly looking for ways to bring Jesus to the world.

Khalil Hattar - P.A. Administration

(Question B2)

Another part of our strategy is digital evangelization. Since the start of the pandemic, we've seen our video engagement and social media presence really take off and make a meaningful impact in people's lives. From that start until the recording of this video, we've captured 2 million impressions and have logged over 42,000 hours of viewed content on Youtube alone. Considering that our average video time is 8 minutes long, we're thrilled but not satisfied by those numbers. But they're more than just figures, they tell the story of people being met by the Gospel and the message of our parish: to be disciples and make disciples. We continue to live stream our Mass every Sunday and regularly reach people from as far away as the Philippines, Ireland, and Canada! We have varied video content that we produce to engage different demographics of people. For example, Father Maletta has a light hearted cooking show called, "In the Kitchen with Padre" as well as an trendier show tackling issues in the Church and the world called, "Bone to Pick". Father Declan's, "Grounded in Faith", shares testimonials from people who have had a life changing faith experience and teaches ways that others can grow in their practice of the faith.

We try to engage people where they are so instead of reading announcements at the end of each Mass, we record a Parish Update video in which various staff members talk about upcoming events in their ministries. The video is sent to parishioner emails and is also posted to social media. We have an active presence on various social media sites in order to continually engage with our parishioners and beyond.

Our media efforts were especially rewarding during Covid so that people could stay connected to the Church and to Mass. Near the beginning of Covid, we called all of our parishioners to ensure that everyone was ok, to offer assistance for those who might need help getting groceries and to make sure everyone knew about the livestream and how to access it. We contacted our 65+ population two more times over the course of the pandemic to check on them and to offer Communion through our Operation Homebound ministry. A parishioner whose husband refused to go to Mass with her began watching the livestream during Covid. He decided to come back to Church and is now on our Alpha team. Another evangelization moment!

Kris Ziegelhofer - HR & Parishioner Engagement

(Questions A2, B1)

We have beautiful liturgies at SJE, and we were so happy when we were able to worship together again. Once Bishop McClory lifted the Mass dispensation, we sent all of our parishioners a letter informing them of the change and letting them know that we would be

restarting our Mass Attendance program and asking them to contact us with any exceptions they may have.

Our Mass Attendance policy is a covenant between our parishioners and the parish. We firmly believe that we need to care for one another's souls and help one another to get to Heaven. We all need to be filled with the Holy Spirit and strengthened by the Eucharist in our daily lives. We ask our parishioners to use their envelopes, even if they give electronically and even if they cannot afford to put anything in it. We track attendance through the envelopes. It truly does make a difference. Currently 85% of our parishioners regularly attend Mass. It is a challenge to keep up with Mass attendance and a drain on time and energy, but we feel it is worth it as our Mass are either mostly filled or filled to capacity.

Natalie DeJarlais - P.A. Worship

(Question A1)

Our Worship team is focused on creating a prayerful and meaningful liturgy every single week. Letters, like this one, from a former parishioner makes all of our hard work worth it. "The reason for this letter is that we are really having a horrible time adjusting to our new Church in Florida. Clearly there is only one St. John the Evangelist like ours. We left Church Saturday night almost in tears; it was like we went to a funeral. We miss you all so very much. Of course, we miss the homilies, but we also miss our prayer partners, our parishioners and the music, oh, the music! I miss my Alpha friends. Father Sammie, I really think you have created something that needs to be extended to other parishes. You need to be the ambassador for being disciples and making disciples, changing churches from ho-hum to TA-DA!"

Our liturgy team works together to ensure that each Mass is well planned down to the very last detail. We want people to be filled with the Holy Spirit; energized to Be Disciples who Make Disciples. There is an army of people who help make sure that Mass flows smoothly in a parish our size. It takes over 50 people per Mass working as Sacristans, Altar Servers, Eucharistic Ministers, Lectors, Greeters, Ushers, Musicians / Singers, Media team and Sacred Grounds to handle all the details. We have 4 different ensembles/choirs: Traditional, Praise, Youth and Teens.

Alison Powell - P.A. Music

(Questions A7, B5)

Our philosophy is to offer Masses that may appeal to different groups of people. One of our Masses is designed to have more traditional hymns while our "Family Mass" features contemporary Christian music. It's commonplace to see people clapping to the beat at this Mass! Another Mass has a more blended approach, featuring both types of music. Having words to songs on our big screens really helps increase participation because people are looking up and projecting their voices rather than looking down at a songbook. Our priests regularly challenge the assembly to participate both in singing and making responses.

For special seasons, such as Advent and Lent, we meet with an expanded group of staff members, including Father Maletta and Father Declan, to review the readings for the season and to work out a theme for a homily series. We encourage all of our ministries to use the same theme so that parishioners are receiving a consistent message throughout the season. Our homilies always have a call to action or way of challenging people to Be Disciples.

Perhaps, it has more impact to hear from a parishioner directly. Here is a recent email that we received: A few weeks ago your homily "He will make a way," has stuck! We appreciate that you are bringing what is on our minds and in our hearts out in your message. Our world is crazy and it comes out in our daily lives. Your message gives me(us) the calmness that is needed in my life. Note I forward and share a lot with my non-catholic family, who appreciate you too!

Whether it is the homily, the podcasts, the songs, you and the entire church are making a difference in this household! This morning I just want you to know how much you are appreciated! Thank you Father!

Fr Declan

One of our Synod goals is to develop a more comprehensive Worship structure and process for planning liturgies. I have recently taken over supporting our Worship team and plan to introduce and utilize the same meeting principles that have made our Leadership Team meetings more effective. We want to clearly define each person's role in liturgy and set up teams of leaders from each of the groups that help run the Mass such as ushers, Eucharist Ministers, lectors, media and sacristans. These leaders can influence and share information from the Worship Team while also making us aware of concerns from their teams. However, I'm most excited about developing a planning process in which we'll plan our liturgies at least three months in advance, create collaboration on themes/messages throughout all our ministries and plan better for Ordinary Time which often is overlooked due to a heavy focus on Advent and Lent.

Katie Fredericksen - Head of School

(Questions A1, A3, A4, A5)

Saint John the Evangelist School is incredibly effective at teaching students the doctrines of the Catholic Church. Students learn Basic Catholic Teachings specific to their grade levels and compete in our Catechism Bowl as part of our curriculum in the school. From 1st grade to grade 8, students memorize BCTs each week. While memorization has a place in catechesis, we are primarily concerned with leading our students to a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Only a relationship with the Lord will sustain them once they leave SJE. Elementary school students are taught basic prayers. The more mature middle school students meditate silently and with Scripture each week. Father Declan also comes to the school weekly to guide 8th graders in Ignatian meditations. Music classes in the school reinforce liturgical music and the meanings behind the songs, making them relatable and familiar to students. Students are fully engaged in Mass and the homilies are focused on making the Gospel meaningful, relevant, and applicable to all students. It is always great seeing students at mass and parish events after they have left the school and hearing how they have grown and found themselves.

Our School and RE programs strive to make our faith a “hands on” experience, not just something they read about in a book. We have a “Living Rosary” service in October. We take them outside to the cemetery to pray for the souls in Purgatory in November. We host a food drive and make Apple pies for the less fortunate during Advent. During Lent we take the students to pray the Stations of the Cross and we prepare projects and lessons for each week. Our students are taught about the message of Divine Mercy and pray the Chaplet together after Easter. In May we celebrate the May Crowning with the students. Before receiving a sacrament each one of the students must participate in a formation retreat. The students of our school also get a lot out of NET Retreats and the Steubenville Trip that is taken in the youth ministry. The students always have great things to say about those, and have a renewed fire in them for their Faith.

Before COVID, middle school students held a dance where the proceeds went toward helping a neighboring school purchase school supplies for their students. Middle school students also have visited Feed My Starving Children where they help to make box lunches. Many students, for service hours, also go to a local center called Phil’s Friends, where you help to make care packages for cancer patients. For service hours, students can also help assemble prayer bags for others, and go to help with Project Lunch Bag, which helps prepare meals for those going hungry.

Amy Goggin - DRE

(Questions A1, A4)

In order to make sure even our youngest parishioners can be involved, children starting in first grade can be in our Youth choir. Children ages 4-7 are welcome each Sunday during the 10am Mass to learn about the Gospel in our “Lil Disciples” program. During the Liturgy of the Word, the littlest ones are given the opportunity to experience Jesus in a way that they can understand. Next year we will incorporate families into our RE program. Once a month, the

entire family will be welcome to enjoy a meal and some faith based activities. We know that the faith begins in the family so we are determined to foster strong relationships with God and each other through this initiative. Beginning in 7th grade, all school and RE students are required to be involved in a liturgical ministry (altar server, lector or choir), and are encouraged to stay in these ministries throughout their high school years, which many of them do.

While it is hard to know the long lasting impact on our students as so many eventually go on to college and move away, we do have many former students who now attend SJE with their own families.

Andrew Wolfe - P.A. Service, Outreach & Youth

(Questions A1, A3, A4)

Besides liturgical ministries and faith formation, our middle and high school students also have many opportunities to grow in faith. We have a middle/high school youth group as well as a small group program. We are also offering Youth Alpha in conjunction with Adult Alpha. We provide childcare for little ones so the whole family can participate on the same night. We also offer service project opportunities that all of our 6th, 7th and 8th graders must do for their Confirmation preparation. Totus Tuus and Vacation Bible School are offered in the summer. A big highlight each summer is our Steubenville Youth Conference. We take over 50 high schoolers each year, and it is definitely a faith building experience for our teens.

Louis Cain

(Question A4)

As teens grow into young adults, they are invited to Alpha. We have 3 people under the age of 30 on our Leadership Team, so we are always trying to figure out how to better reach this challenging demographic. We run a young adult group that currently has around 30 people in it, and we are seeking to recruit people of capacity to increase their influence and mobilize them as leaders. Our upcoming Leadership Summits will include both teen and young adult leaders.

Andrew Wolfe

(Questions A6, B1, B2, B3, B4)

Oftentimes, the first step on the road to becoming a disciple is through service. Sometimes that road starts with serving and sometimes it starts with being served. We try to ensure that every service initiative that we do has an evangelization element to it. For example, we ask guests at

our More Than Meals Food Pantry if we can pray with them when they come to pick up food. We've included Bibles or spiritual books with our Thanksgiving meals, which 50 parishioners deliver to 1500 people on Thanksgiving Day.

We are proud of our very robust service program. In addition to our food pantry, we also have 50 parishioners who deliver groceries to over 100 families monthly all throughout Northwest Indiana. Our Angel Tree program each Christmas collects mountains of gifts that are distributed at roughly 10 different charities each year. Crafting with Angels and Phil's Friends support those who are sick or homebound.

During Covid, we started Operation Homebound to be able to bring the Eucharist to those who were unable to join us at Mass when things began opening up. A group of Eucharist Ministers brought Communion to over 100 parishioners. We continue to do our best to reach out to those who are homebound in order to bring Jesus to them.

Through reading the Synod documents, we realize we have an opportunity to tie our service efforts back to the Catholic Social Teaching as well as the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. This will be a focus for our ministry in the future as well as bringing new programs like, "Celebrating Recovery" to our parish.

Father Maletta

We all feel so blessed to be part of this amazing parish. Responding to the Synod questionnaire was a very helpful exercise for our entire team. It helped us take a step back to joyfully reflect on the areas where we have succeeded, but more importantly, it highlighted the challenges we still face and made clear how much more we have to do. Perhaps, when it comes to the mission of being disciples who make disciples, we never fully arrive but just keep moving along with the journey? We are grateful for the opportunity that the Synod has presented and are excited to continue to grow as a missionary parish!