

Saint Thomas the Apostle Church and School

- Good to Great

(Welcoming, Accessibility and Inclusion Commission Report—September 2013)

Welcoming, Accessibility and Inclusion Commission (WAIC)

Overview

A commission of the Pastoral Council was charged with gathering interested parishioners and looking closely at how new members are welcomed and drawn into the life and activity of the parish and/or school community. Single individuals, married couples and families who have recently joined our parish and school community were contacted and asked about their experience. How warmly did they find themselves welcomed when they first came among us? How was it for them to find access to what is going on in the parish and/or school community? When they hear that people are doing this or that, were they able to find “the door in?” Finally, once in the door, were they, in fact, engaged by others to become involved, or were they left on the fringes of the interaction and activity.

The first phase of the study was to survey new parish members and all households attending Saint Thomas the Apostle School. The survey was mailed to parishioners and given to the oldest sibling per household attending the school. It was also made available to take online.

The second phase of the study involved interviewing interested parties (based on survey responses) and targeting specific individuals and groups (within the school and parish) that had roles related to **welcoming, accessibility and inclusion (WAI)**. The following is a synopsis of the interviewing process:

- 1) Identify specific programs or events sponsored by the parish (Sunday School, Bible School, Youth Adventures, Sports Teams, etc.) – particularly if there is a limit to the number of individuals that can participate and/or if there are requirements and procedures for participation. Inquire into these requirements and procedures and the rationale for their being in place.
- 2) Interview the parish staff member in charge of the oversight of these events or programs as well as the leaders of these events or programs asking them identify the targeted audience for participation. If there are requirements for inclusion and/or procedures to limit participation, inquire into the rationale for their being in place.
- 3) Identify informal events (e.g., play dates, birthday parties) organized by participants of programs (e.g., school parents, team parents). Inquire of parish staff members the degree to which some (students or parents, young people or adults) are usually excluded from these events, and the pastoral procedures taken to raise awareness and encourage their inclusion.

The third and final phase of this process is this written report which (after much prayer and discernment) is an attempt to explain the followed process, summarize the findings and provide our observations and recommendations.

In a general statement regarding our findings, both Saint Thomas the Apostle School and Parish are doing a good job regarding WAI. However, there is room for improvement and it is our hope that through further awareness, corrective action and possible new implementation we will move from Good to Great. While performing well overall, both the survey and interviews indicate that there is a disparity between those who have had a good experience at Saint Thomas, and those who have a negative experience. Approximately 80% of the families surveyed responded with positive experiences; however, the other 15-20% generally had extremely poor reception by the parish and/or school and often felt isolated.

Perhaps three (3) of the most profound insights revealed by this study are:

1. Doing more activities or providing more opportunities does not necessarily equate to a healthier community when it comes to its ability to be more WAI.
2. The West Michigan culture, which prides itself on being strong in family values and rooted in the family, may also act as a barrier to newcomers to the community. This may be especially the case when new arrivals to the community have no family ties to offer support or assistance in integrating into their new environment. This West Michigan family value may cause established families to focus within and not look around to help newcomers. At Saint Thomas, this “focus within” may cause us to inadvertently or unknowingly leave newcomers feeling isolated, left out or even snubbed.
3. There is room for process improvement and better flow for New Member Welcome (NMW). When a new parishioner or family fails to attend a NMW session, there is not a clear process in place for the NMW team to inform office staff of a need for follow-up with such new members. A sign-in sheet is turned into the parish office, indicating who attended, however the NMW team is unsure of how the office handles those families missing from the sign-in sheet; that is, those absent from the session.

It is our hope and prayer that Saint Thomas will learn from this report valuable insights into how we are *good* as a community when it comes to being WAI; and that it will also help facilitate necessary chance and awareness to grow into a *great* WAI community.

Phase One - Survey

Survey Distribution (February 2013)

1. The survey was available to be taken online both to parishioners and school families at: <http://goo.gl/ttaQg> (the online survey has been closed)
2. Hard copies of the survey were distributed accordingly:
 - Mailed surveys to over 170 new families to the parish within the last three (3) years
 - Surveys went home with the eldest of each household attending Saint Thomas the Apostle School
 - The survey was included in the “Pieces” a widely distributed school publication
3. Notification of the survey was also published in the church bulletin
4. Completed hardcopy surveys could be mailed or dropped off to the parish office or returned to school.

Responses

A total of 47 responses were collected (both online and hardcopy) and all were compiled into an online version so that responses could be easily shared (these links were published in the church bulletin).

Survey Responses (spreadsheet):

<http://goo.gl/Z7rGx>

Survey Summary (graphs):

<http://goo.gl/RoqlQ>

(Please note that it is best to download the entire spreadsheet of the survey responses in order to view the report in its entirety.)

Survey results indicated that Saint Thomas is at an approximate 80% success rate when it comes to WAI. However, the remaining 15-20% often voiced extreme negative experiences and may be left feeling isolated, left-out and neglected.

Phase Two - Interviews

Through the survey and bulletin articles, interested individuals and groups were solicited to help with the study. Some members and groups also came forward in willingness to be interviewed by the commission to provide insight into the WAI topic. Along with those volunteering to be interviewed, the commission identified key individuals and groups within the parish and school and setup interviews.

The goal of the interviews was to provide the commission with personal first-hand experience from individuals entering the school and/or parish. School and parish staff members were also interviewed with the purpose of understanding the current process for bringing in new members. In other words, what is supposed to happen when a new family arrives? Besides these two groups, other parish and school organizations were also included to provide further insight into how we try to be WAI.

Phase Three – The Final Report

It has been our attempt in this report (after much prayer and discernment) to offer a synopsis of our findings and insights in regard to Saint Thomas the Apostle School's and Parish's abilities to provide a community that is welcoming, accessible and inclusive. Throughout, we have attempted to be transparent in our process by openly sharing our findings (survey and final report) and always welcoming feedback and assistance from others. Tools to help us in our discernment have been the survey results, interviews and other feedback. It is our hope and prayer that our insights and recommendations in this report be helpful in moving Saint Thomas forward from a Good to Great community in its ability to provide a WAI environment.

Insights, Recommendations and Conclusion

Insights

- Saint Thomas is 80% on the “right track,” leaving room for improvement (Good to Great)
 - There is a disparity between those who “love” Saint Thomas and those who have had a bad experience (many have had a good experience, but those who have not, have had an extremely bad experience)
 - West Michigan family-centered culture may cause established individuals and families in the community to inadvertently overlook/exclude newcomers to the parish and/or school
 - Those without family ties may be left feeling abandoned, neglected, or isolated
 - Doing more activities or providing more opportunities does not necessarily equate to a healthier community when it comes to its ability to be more WAI
- The school has a formalized plan in place for welcoming new families, assigning a mentor family and tracking them for at least a year.
- The parish has a plan for welcoming new parishioners; however, it has not been formally documented, allowing for tracking and follow-up mishaps.
- The school is actively marketing itself and recruiting new members
- Parish and school members (the people of the parish and school) could do a better job in reaching out to new people
- Aquinas College students warmly appreciate being welcomed in the Saint Thomas community

Recommendations

- The school and parish staff could collaborate in having a streamlined, unified and formally documented process for welcoming and tracking new parishioners and/or school families. This process may include:
 - Assigning mentor families
 - Follow-up phone calls, every few months
 - A possible combined new member packet
 - Better tracking and follow-up by staff members
 - Provide multiple meet-and-greet opportunities
- Encouraging parishioners and parents to Always take the opportunity to introduce themselves and welcome new people
 - Learn and call people by name
 - Say, “hello” and take a genuine opportunity to learn something new
 - There needs to be an awareness and realization that newcomers may need help in acclimating to the community—they may simply need you to reach out to them
- Staff and stipend positions must be acutely aware of their perceived attitude toward others when approached with questions or concerns; taking care not to be defensive or non-courteous and modeling WAI behavior—valuing each individual for his or her talents
- Have greeters welcome parishioners before the start of Mass

- Have new parishioners and visitors stand to be welcomed at the end of Mass (each Sunday or once a Month). This helps to provide a welcoming to newcomers as well as provides other parishioners with awareness.
- Have church picnics and/or more informal events (not tied to raising money)
- Work to eliminate caps on the number of individuals who can participate in school and parish sponsored events, such as Vacation Bible School or The Parish Auction.
- Synchronize age requirements (age cut-offs) between school and parish and try to be flexible if the cut-off acts as a detriment to a particular family situation
- Parish and School events should be carefully planned to maximize relationship building, not simply activities to complete

Conclusion

We can improve upon our process for formal New Member Welcome sessions so that we might be able to make personal and purposeful contact with those new members who are not able to or choose not to attend a NMW session. We need to continually reach out in love to those who are new to our community. Taking another look at the existing schedule for NMW sessions may also be warranted in order to assess whether the schedule is conducive to capturing as many new members as possible. It has also been suggested that another team be added to NMW (4 teams instead of 3) in order to get better coverage for the sessions.

Awareness and a slight cultural shift may play a large role in moving the Saint Thomas community forward from Good to Great in welcoming individuals and families, providing access to various events and activities and being more inclusive. We need to be more aware of newcomers in our community. Also, our family-focused culture may be inadvertently blinding us to others outside our established circle. While not intentional, focusing on our own families may be causing us to ignore and alienate those without local family connections; or those who are simply on the fringe and trying to enter into the parish/school community—thus, leaving them to fend for themselves in learning the unspoken “rules of the community.” Sometimes all it takes is recognizing a new person in Mass or in the hallways at school; then taking the extra step to strike up a conversation with them, welcome them to the community, invite them to events/activities and follow-up with them later. This may be a reminder that we are all called to be members of Christ’s family.