

St. Thomas Pastoral Council
Meeting Minutes April 28, 2015

Present: Fr. Bill, Fr. Todd, Rob Hohler, Rod Gauvin, Dcn. Jim Miles, Bill Cavnar, Mary Cavnar, Paul Thiefels, Joanne Thiefels, Moira Cullen, Cathy Dowling

Absent: Naomi Corera, Frank Lum, Marie Williams, Dave Williams

Minutes from the 2-24-2015 meeting were briefly reviewed and approved. We noted that we did not have a meeting in March because of the communal penance services.

Rob Hohler provided a detailed report on the parish's finances. The most important fact is that our annual income is somewhat larger than had been projected. This is in part due to increased Sunday collections, but also due to other sources, including increased parking lot revenue, and one substantial bequest.

On the down side, the school's income is lower than expected, mostly because of dropping enrollment. (Last year's student body had 226 students, but this year's has only 210.) The decreased enrollment is because of unusually small upper grade classes (7th grade has only 8-9 students, while the 8th grade has 14-15). The lower grades have substantially more students, so the decreased enrollment will probably correct itself as long as we continue to start sufficient numbers of students in the very early grades. Rob and the school administration have been able to reduce the cost structure some by taking advantage of staff reduction through natural attrition (no layoffs needed), and combining two staff positions into one.

Another helpful cost reduction factor has been that our regular church expenses have been lower than expected. As a result of all the above factors, our bank balance has been increasing from month to month at a slow but steady pace.

We have six months left in our parish debt retirement program, and we are on target to bring that to a successful close.

Our DSA campaign was successful. Our 2015 goal set by the diocese was \$108K, and we have already taken \$116K in gifts and pledges, with a few more contributions expected in the next few weeks. So far about 300 families have made DSA contributions. Although St. Thomas parish has done well in the DSA campaign, Bishop Boyea is still somewhat concerned for the diocese as a whole. Many other parishes are way behind in their campaigns. Fr. Bill mentioned that only about 10 parishes have met their assigned goals.

Next Rob went through a detailed list of known major repair needs and where we stand with them. Most of these are open projects, and have not been prioritized or budgeted. One nice exception to that is a small resurfacing project for the north end of the parking lot. Due to a gift by a parish member, that \$21K project has already been paid for, and the work will be done sometime in the next few months.

We had a brief discussion about how to proceed with the other repair needs on the list. One suggestion was to establish a "rolling" campaign, in which we would present the most urgent needs to the parish one at a time, and then take care of those needs when we have collected sufficient funds to proceed. The downside to this approach is the fear that parishioners will feel "nickled-and-dimed" constantly. Rod raised the idea of establishing a more substantial long-term vision for these kinds of financial investments, a "branding" campaign that helped communicate to parishioners the parish's needs in a

way that engaged them. We also discussed introducing this long-term campaign idea near the end of the current calendar year, inviting parishioners to make additional gifts and contributions before the end of the tax year. Dcn. Jim suggested a parishioner who would make an excellent organizer for such a long-term capital-raising effort.

Another cost-reduction suggestion was to make a more concerted effort at soliciting low bids from skilled tradespeople who were parishioners, with the hope of getting some repair work done at discounted rates. Rob mentioned that there were rules (presumably diocesan) about taking such bids, and that it would have to be done carefully.

Rob announced his intention of providing the parish with a full annual report at the end of September. We requested that Rob also provide the Council with quarterly reports along the lines of what he provided this night. Rob readily agreed.

Fr. Bill mentioned that planning was proceeding with the church building beautification project. He has been assembling a committee who will start meeting soon (in the next several months). The work to be done included adding a major mural to the ceiling at the front of the church, and some additional decorative stenciling at a number of places.

Fr. Bill also expressed hope for making some other kinds of improvements. He mentioned that the St. Thomas cemetery has several repair needs. Also he felt that some kind of prayer chapel structure at the cemetery would be a good thing to have.

The Council also discussed the new part-time Development Director position that we have begun advertising for. This person would have a number of responsibilities, all centered around engaging parishioners in a more deliberate way: sending thank-you notes for gifts, helping parishioners set up bequests in their wills, contacting parishioners who would be potential donors, etc. We agreed that we should make personal commitments to pray for the search for a Development Director.

The next topic was the on-going small groups studying the Creed. In general, the groups that actually formed have been working well. There were, however, some snags. There were people who had volunteered to lead small groups who, for one reason or another, ended up with no group members. Some of these leaders apparently fell through the cracks, and did not end up in any group. Bill passed on a complaint from a parishioner who has been attending a group in which the leader always started every meeting with a 10-minute teaching, which was not part of the suggested order for a meeting.

Progress through the ten sessions of planned material has been uneven. Some groups have postponed meetings since their members did not want to miss any material because of schedule conflicts. Others have continued on at a steady pace.

Fr. Bill asked what the parish should do after all of the groups finish. Given the generally positive experience most groups are having, it seems probable that there would be interest in having other similar programs in the future. However, we should have breaks between such programs so as not to risk annoying or wearying parishioners with back-to-back programs. Regarding possible materials to use as the basis for such future groups, there appears to be an abundance of sources. Dcn. Jim mentioned that CFM has many decades of experience producing study materials of this type. Another idea that produced a lot of interest in the Council was Fr. Barron's video series on Catholicism. This also has a study guide.

The Council suggested that Fr. Bill should give a brief report from the pulpit on the Creed study groups. In preparation for that, group leaders should solicit encouraging testimonies from group members about the impact of the study groups on their lives, and pass those on to Fr. Bill. We also discussed how we need to schedule some sort of debriefing session for group leaders.

Fr. Todd shared some about an idea that he has been working on for Neighborhood Ambassadors, and this topic stirred some interesting discussion. Ambassadors would be parishioners responsible for particular geographic areas who would take the initiative in reaching out to other parishioners who live in their areas. The Ambassadors would organize events such as barbecues and picnics to foster a sense of community among parishioners who lived close to each other. In particular, Ambassadors could also provide a “welcome wagon” to new parishioners, giving them such things as a parish directory, the latest bulletin, and Bibles or catechisms to those who did not have them. Fr. Todd mentioned that we have around 200 new families join St. Thomas every year. If we had 30 Ambassadors, then each of them would only have to reach out to 6 or 7 new families on average.

Rod shared that he and his family have already begun functioning in this way in the Chelsea area. He was surprised to learn that there were some 30 parish families that lived near Chelsea. He and his family have committed to calling everybody on the list until they make contact.

A final topic was the planned Alpha Course to be held in the fall. This is a 10-week series, with each week's session consisting of a nice sit-down dinner, followed by a video less than one hour in length, followed by a discussion group. Attendees would be assigned to groups, led by a facilitator. Each group sits together at a table, eats together, watches the video together, and discusses the video. Fr. John Ricardo, pastor of Our Lady of Good Counsel Church (OLGC) in Plymouth MI, brought the Alpha Course to his parish a number of years ago. At that point, Fr. John cancelled all other parish activities and instead set up a number of on-going parallel Alpha Course series at different times in the week to accommodate as many different schedules as possible. The outcome was a completely revitalized parish. Since that time, OLGC has continued to give Alpha courses on a regular basis for new and prospective parishioners.

To have an Alpha Course here, the main logistical detail would be to provide a nice sit-down dinner for a number of people for 10 weeks in a row. We have a group here at the parish who could provide this service, namely, the ladies who run the FFF monthly dinners and the funeral luncheons.

Moira volunteered to contact the OLGC parish office to find someone who could talk about how the Alpha Course works at their parish.

Here is a list of actions the Council decided for:

- Continue to pursue the idea of a “rolling” capital campaign, combined with an effort to engage parishioners more deeply in understanding and supporting the various repair and maintenance needs.
- Look for someone to organize such a campaign.
- Commit to regular prayer in the search for a Development Director.
- Schedule a debriefing session for small group leaders.
- Solicit from small group leaders testimonies and stories about positive changes in parishioners' lives because of the small groups.
- Schedule for a report from Fr. Bill (in a homily) about the small group program and its outcome.
- Contact Our Lady of Good Counsel parish for some additional information about how they

implemented the Alpha Course.

The next Pastoral Council meeting will be Tuesday, May 26, 2015.