



## **PARTNERS IN THE GOSPEL**

# **General Q&A**

**Updated January 2024**

(Updates: Two new vocations questions (marked by \*) on page 7 and 8. Revised text is turned **green**.)

### **Q: What is Partners in the Gospel?**

**A:** Partners in Gospel is a strategic pastoral planning effort taking place across the Archdiocese of Seattle to re-invigorate and renew our local Catholic Church. The mission of the Catholic Church - which is to encounter Jesus, accompany others and live the joy of the Gospel - is at the heart of this effort.

We must re-invigorate our parish communities, which includes adapting to the needs of the faithful and our current reality. This strategic pastoral planning effort also examines how we can best use our resources to support vibrant, sustainable, mission-focused parish communities across the entire Archdiocese of Seattle.

### **Q: Why now?**

**A:** Today we face many realities that impact parish life and make it difficult to fully live out our mission. We face an urgent – yet exciting – opportunity to transform parish life.

Over the past few decades our local Catholic Church has experienced a decrease of engaged parishioners, fewer priests, dwindling finances, deteriorating campus conditions and more. Here are just a few statistics:

- Today the archdiocese has 80 diocesan pastors for 174 locations; by 2036, we estimate we will only have 66 diocesan pastors, an 18% decrease. (We also have fewer seminarians and fewer lay ministry leaders.)
- While the overall population in the Archdiocese of Seattle is growing, registered households are declining, along with Mass attendance, baptisms, first communions, marriages in the Church and parish giving:
  - From 2010 to 2019, Mass attendance declined 11%.
  - Between 2010 and 2019, baptisms declined 32% and Catholic weddings declined nearly 19%.

### **Q: What will be the outcome with Partners in the Gospel?**

**A:** There is no predetermined outcome. We know that Partners in the Gospel will bring most parishes and schools together into a new family structure with two or more other parishes under the leadership of one pastor and **one or more** parochial vicars. The parish family will have about three years to become one canonical parish. The pastor, parish and school leaders and parishioners will determine how this new family will join together. Joining together does not necessarily mean any church building or schools will close.

**Q: Are other dioceses doing this?**

**A:** Yes. Dioceses across the United States have implemented similar initiatives. The Partners in the Gospel Core Team has connected with many of them to hear their stories and learn from their experience. Using these insights, our archdiocesan team developed a planning and consultation model that reflects the uniqueness of the Archdiocese of Seattle. Our model is consultative, embraces our cultural diversity and history, and reflects our large geography that includes concentrated city centers, suburban and rural communities.

While we appreciate the guidance and insights from other dioceses, success in the Archdiocese of Seattle will come from the creativity and collaboration of each parish family, led by the Holy Spirit.

**Q: Can you define what you mean by “parish” and “parish family”?**

**A:** A *parish* is defined as a certain community of the faithful stably constituted within the archdiocese, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a priest as its proper pastor under the authority of the Archbishop of Seattle. (c. 515§1)

Note that the term *parish* refers to the *community of people* and not the sacred building designated for divine worship — the church (with a lowercase “c”).

A *parish family* is a group of two or more neighboring parishes under the leadership of one pastor and one or more parochial vicars. Over time, the parish family will determine its own consultative leadership team(s) and how they may share resources such as staff, ministries and outreach.

**Q: Will all parishes be in families?**

**A:** Most parishes will be placed in a family. However, there will be some parishes, due to size, geographic location, unique cultural communities or other factors, that will not join a family. These parishes will still be part of the Partners of the Gospel renewal effort to plan for how to best carry out the mission of the Church.

**Q: Why are we doing it this way?**

**A:** Partners in the Gospel is a highly consultative approach that gives parishioners the ability to provide input and take an active role in building and renewing their local Church. The process allows communities time to truly journey together and accompany one another, while forming one new vibrant parish community. It is intended to give priests more time for pastoral care - while also ensuring no parish community is left out.

The new parish family will benefit from the shared gifts, talents, finances, resources and more from each of the joining parishes. This consolidation means that the new parish family may have more resources to carry out the mission, which could include benefits like a larger active youth group and fuller Masses in one location — and a larger outreach ministry at another location.

It really comes down to the creativity and engagement of the parishioners and parish leaders to determine how the family will collaborate. The archdiocese is committing significant resources to support parishes throughout this journey.

**Q: Does this mean churches/parishes are closing?**

- A:** Yes and no. First, it is important to note the parish is not the church building. The parish is the community of the faithful and all that comes with it.
- The parish - community of faithful - will not close, but will join together to form one new community of faith.
  - It is likely that overtime some buildings will close as part of this process.

*Further explanation:*

A parish family is comprised of different parish communities that will eventually become one canonical parish. Decisions will be made at the local level to reflect the needs of each parish community. The parish leadership, with input from parishioners and guidance from the Holy Spirit through a synodal listening process, will make decisions about how to best carry out the mission locally.

This means that the new parish will determine many things, such as what ministries to provide, what outreach to the community is possible, what Mass times to offer and what and how properties and buildings will be used.

**Q: Is this simply expanded clustering?**

- A:** No. This is not expanded clustering. To enable and support parishes in this renewal effort, Partners in the Gospel uses a fundamentally different approach to the historical clustering model. The *parish family* is a temporary step on the way to becoming one *parish*. Each parish family will have a comprehensive parish support plan, direct support from a liaison staff member, employed and funded by the Chancery and many tools and resources to help parishes every step of the way, including detailed handbooks for navigating prayer and worship, community, discipleship, governance and leadership, and much more.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PROCESS

**Q: What is the process?**

- A:** This is a multiyear, consultative process that encourages everyone to participate.

In the first phase, the archdiocese requested input on draft parish families from priests and parish leaders, school principals and leadership, archdiocesan employees and all Catholics across the archdiocese in the Fall 2023. The public input phase, with more than 3,000 reports, led to recommended changes in 25 parish families. The 78 parishes in these families held a second round of input.

In December 2023, the Oversight Committee and the Presbyteral Council finalized a recommendation for Archbishop Etienne, who will discern and then officially promulgate the new parish family structure in early 2024.

In the next phase, parish families will work together over three years or so to determine how they will best become one parish (by summer 2027). Each parish family will have a liaison assigned to them to help throughout the process.

**Q: How long does it last?**

**A:** There is no finite time limit for Partners in the Gospel. The consultative phase took place in 2023. Once new parish families are officially formed in July 2024, they will have three years to become one parish. While this is the target date, each parish family is unique: Some parish families may wish to become one canonical parish sooner, while others may need a bit more time.

**Q: When will this happen?**

**A:** Here is a timeline of the key milestones for Partners in the Gospel:

- January 2023: Public launch
- Feb- July 2023: Leadership consultation
- Aug/Sept 2023: Parish and school staff provided input on parish families
- Fall 2023: Parishioners provided input on parish families in two rounds
- Early 2024: Final parish families are announced
- July 2024: Parish families go into effect with one pastor and parochial vicar(s)
- 2024–2027: Parish families journey together
- 2027: Parish families become one canonical parish

**Q: What does consultation involve?**

**A:** Consultation using a synodal listening model gives everyone a chance to review the potential family structure, pray to the Holy Spirit about it and provide their input.

The consultation process was built intentionally to ensure everyone can offer input. The consultation started with priests, parish and school staff and then the people of God. Before a new parish family draft is created, changes are approved by the Oversight Committee and Presbyteral Council.

**Q: What will change at parishes when this is implemented?**

**A:** Several things will change immediately and many more will evolve over time with input from the community. Immediate changes include:

- One pastor and one or more parochial vicars will be assigned - many or all of whom will be “new” to that parish community (but not “new” to ministry).
- Mass times will change at some locations
- Parish leadership meetings - it will be impossible for the pastor to attend numerous finance council meetings or school commission meetings that are on the same night so schedules will likely need to be adjusted.

*Further explanation:*

The new parish family will have more collective resources (people and finances) to carry out the mission of the Church. What this looks like for each parish family will be determined by the creativity of that community. While each parish family will be assigned a pastor and one or more parochial vicars, **decisions for how the parish family comes together** are intended to be made by the local community to ensure what emerges reflects the gifts and needs of their specific communities.

Working with their liaison, each parish family will have resources and tools to help them implement changes along this three-year process. Keep in mind that these changes are taking place to help achieve the larger goal of renewing parish life so that we can help others encounter Jesus.

**Q: How will parishes integrate different nationalities or charisms?**

**A:** We will continue to pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance. We are one universal Catholic Church and we honor the rich diversity, which brings fullness and joy to our faith communities.

All parishes have their differences – whether it is nationality, ecclesiology, outreach ministries and more. Partners in the Gospel requires all of us to be welcoming. It requires all of us to take time to learn about each other and about the larger community we serve. The archdiocese will provide more tangible guidance on how to bring people and leadership teams together – but at its heart, we must all work together to build a faith community that reflects the love of Jesus so that we can effectively be his living body.

**Q: How will priests be selected for the new parish family?**

**A:** As with all priest placements, the Priest Personnel Board (PPB), made up of priests and Chancery leaders, makes recommendations to the archbishop. Priests will have individual conversations about their desires and how they would like to serve in the future – either as a pastor, a parochial vicar or in a different supportive role.

**Q: How will naming work?**

**A:** A parish family will have a temporary name with an assigned number. Each parish retains its parish name until the family becomes one canonical parish. It is also important to note that the name of a parish is different than the name of a church building.

As the parish family works together it will develop their “One Parish Plan,” focused on how it will become one canonical parish. In the last phase of the planning process, the parish family will begin discerning its new name based on a list of approved names.

The list will contain more recent saint names along with more traditional (mostly saint) names. The parish family will submit their top five choices, which should not be the same name as any existing church names in their deanery or adjacent deaneries. Ultimately, the archbishop will select the name based on the top five names submitted by the parish family from the approved list.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT PEOPLE

**Q: Who is leading this effort?**

**A:** There are many different groups involved in the research, planning and execution of this strategic pastoral planning effort:

- **Partners in the Gospel Core Team** is comprised of co-leads Father Gary Lazzeroni, Vicar General and Caitlin Moulding, Chief Operations Officer, and 10 other lay leaders.
- **Oversight Committee** is a diverse group of priests, lay leaders, a religious sister, a deacon, and superintendent of Catholic Schools.
- **Presbyteral Council** is made up of priests, including those elected by each of the 10 deaneries, who advise and consult with Archbishop Etienne.

- **Parish family liaisons**, hired and trained by the Archdiocese of Seattle, will support parish families in the process of becoming one parish.
- **PartnersEdge** is a research consulting firm that has helped other dioceses work through similar planning efforts.
- **You** — play a significant role in this effort with your input and prayers.

**Q: What does this mean for priests?**

**A:** Today, priests across the archdiocese are spread thin and spend significant time on administrative activities instead of pastoral care. With the implementation of Partners in the Gospel, over time, priests will be able to focus more of their efforts on the pastoral care and relationships with members of their parish community.

Partners in the Gospel will also require the support, the expertise and the gifts of our extern priests from other dioceses who will be assigned to support parish families and our retired priests who often fill in for priests who are sick or traveling.

Here are a few other changes:

- With the new family structure, some priests will become pastors, while others will become parochial vicars to ensure the best possible pastoral care for the community.
- Canon Law assumes a priest will celebrate no more than one regularly scheduled Mass per day. The law allows a priest, with permission from the bishop, to celebrate up to three Masses on a Sunday. We know that many priests are celebrating more than that today, and as part of our planning for the future, we need to look at the strain this puts on priests.
- Priests will need more lay leadership support than ever before, which presents a great opportunity for Catholics to bring their professional experiences to parish life.

**Q: Will my priest change?**

**A:** Quite possibly - many parishioners will have a new pastor as part of the priest placement process for Partners in the Gospel.

**Q: What does this mean for parishioners?**

**A:** Overall, parishioners should experience a more vibrant and engaged Catholic community. They will have more opportunities for personal faith growth and the opportunity for a closer relationship with their parish leaders.

Practically, it also means that parishioners will experience administrative changes. This will differ by parish family, but some changes might include a new pastor and parochial vicar, changes to Mass times and locations, changes to parish leadership teams and new outreach ministry opportunities.

**Q: What does this mean for deacons?**

**A:** Deacons play a vital role in the life of the Church. They are gifted at accompaniment and bringing Jesus to the margins. This work must continue and will hopefully grow exponentially through Partners in the Gospel. Potential roles include supporting people as they process grief associated with the potential changes or leading the synodal discernment process at their parish for the parish family input.

**Q: What does this mean for lay leaders?**

**A:** As the Church lives out Partners in the Gospel, the work of Lay Ecclesial Ministers will become even more important. Lay leaders are needed at all levels of parish life from leading ministries and liturgy planning to accounting and marketing expertise.

Partners in the Gospel provides a great opportunity for lay people to become even more involved in parish life.

To help train lay leaders, the Archdiocese of Seattle relaunched the Lay Ecclesial Ministry formation program to strengthen and support our existing Lay Ecclesial Ministers while we train new ones. Read more about it [here](#).

**Q: What does this mean for staff?**

**A:** As parishes form into families there will inevitably be staff changes. How Partners in the Gospel will impact a specific staff role will certainly depend on the makeup and needs of the new parish family. Parish leaders are urged to move slowly and take their time in determining the needs of a parish family - especially as it relates to staffing.

It is important to remember that the goal of this effort is to renew parish life and doing so *will require many people*. There are many open positions across the archdiocese and many new positions will be created that will provide opportunities for staff to bring their gifts and talents to a new community. Human Resources is exploring ways to help support people who may be displaced through this process by matching them to other open positions in the archdiocese.

**Q: What is the role of the parish family liaison?**

**A:** The liaison is a professional hired and trained by the Archdiocese of Seattle to support parishes as they journey in their new family to become one parish. They will use the tools, resources and other guidance to help the parish family navigate how to approach prayer and worship, evangelization, administration, governance and more in their new configuration — accounting for the gifts and needs of its community. They will also support the parish in the creation of the One Parish Plan, which will be presented to the archbishop before becoming one canonical parish.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT OTHER TOPICS

**Q: How will Partners in the Gospel help us better cultivate priestly vocations?\***

**A:** Studies show the most effective way to cultivate priestly vocations is through an invitation by a parish priest. The journey from hearing the Lord's call to discernment to formation is a long process, which takes years and patient accompaniment. The new parish family structure will allow priests additional time to be more present to youth and young adults, to invite them toward a priestly vocation, and to accompany them in their discernment. Additionally, priests will be more able to lead discernment groups like the True Heart platform.

One hope for parish families, in partnership with the vocations team, is to develop and support parishioners in encouraging young men to consider a vocation of service for the Church. In many dioceses, vocation teams support priests in identifying those with a potential call to priesthood and religious life, as well as organizing discernment groups, and praying for those discerning their vocation.

**Q: How are we cultivating priestly vocations?\***

**A:** The Archdiocesan vocations team has expanded to include a full-time vocation director and three associate vocation directors. This has led to more opportunities to accompany young men discerning and invite others to consider the priesthood. Specifically, our vocations team focuses on prayer, education, and encouragement.

- Prayer: Following our Lord Jesus' invitation to ask for laborers to serve in the harvest, parishes around the archdiocese regularly host holy hours dedicated to praying for vocations, as well as Serra Club chapters and other lay groups.
- Education: The vocations team is present at parishes, schools, diocesan events and retreats to teach people about vocations and how to discern them. This message is echoed through several communication efforts including the annual seminarian poster, Vocations website and social media channels.
- Encouragement: Through events like discernment retreats and Quo Vadis Days, young men are encouraged to consider priesthood and to discern their vocation.

**Q: What can we do now?**

**A:** We ask everyone to pray for this renewal effort. Each parish received prayer cards to give people to pray during Mass or on their own.

Additionally, we ask people to review the [Partners in the Gospel](#) materials online to become more familiar with the overall mission of the Church, the goals of this effort and the process we are undertaking. People may also wish to read through the Current Reality report or watch the presentation to understand why there is an urgent need to make changes now.

Parish leaders should look for ways to foster community while grounding people in the mission of the Church. The Tilling the Soil guide ([English](#) | [Spanish](#)) was created to give parish leaders a way to do this. Suggestions include activities like:

- Praying the Partners of the Gospel prayer at Masses
- Small faith-sharing groups
- Discussions about the Current Reality Report