

# St. Vincent de Paul Church      Mission Readiness Statement

## **0. Introduction.**

After reflecting on Pope Francis' *The Joy of the Gospel* and Archbishop Lori's Pastoral Letter *A Light Brightly Shining*, examining carefully the results of the survey of our parishioners on the topic of evangelization, and discussing at length our beliefs about evangelization as individuals and as a parish, we, the people of St. Vincent de Paul Church, together with our pastor, submit the following Mission Readiness Statement.

We have a theologically sound and pastorally attractive notion of evangelization. We have a number of strengths and opportunities for evangelization. We have a realistic understanding of the challenges facing us in this regard, and the foundations of a plan for dealing with those challenges. Wholehearted in community and liturgy, and dedicated in service to the poor, we are a people inspired to be and become more fully Christian, and to share the joy of Christ with others.

## **1. Our Parish Theology of Evangelization.**

We believe that any sound Catholic notion of evangelization must be profoundly Trinitarian: it must announce good news about the Holy Spirit dwelling in the Church, good news about the Jesus who models the fullness of God's mercy as well as the capacity of our human nature to share in God's own divine nature, and, perhaps most importantly of all, good news about the God whom Jesus calls *Abba*. We believe that "Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming **the good news of God**" (Mark 1:14).

We therefore criticize any model of evangelization that effectively announces bad news about God. We reject any model that attempts to scare people into faith: *God is out to get you, but we can save you*. We do not say *God loves me because I believe in Jesus* or *God loves me because I receive the sacraments*. Rather, we assert: I believe in Jesus and I receive the sacraments because God loves me. We believe that this notion of evangelization is both more theologically sound and more pastorally attractive than a model that offers to save people from the bad news of God.

We believe our theology of evangelization is manifest in the life of the parish: in the richness of our Eucharistic celebrations with their extensive lay participation; in our persistent and costly discipleship and ministry to the poor and hungry of the inner city; and in the way our small parish opens our doors to a wide variety of community partners so that many may be assisted (through acts of compassion and witness to the good news) to lives that more fully realize the dignity of the human person that is innately theirs.

We strive to present a God who believes that our being made in the divine image and likeness is much more important than our sinfulness. We invite people in the name of this all-loving and merciful God to participate in the divine project of creating the universe as the kingdom of justice and peace.

## 2. Mission Readiness.

Our analysis of our strengths is based largely on the survey data. It should be noted at the outset that we were one of only two parishes in the archdiocese where the number of survey instruments completed was greater than the average weekly attendance, so our data reflect a very broad range of parishioners, by no measure only the most-active elite.

Basic data: We are a vibrant, small parish (avg. attendance = 244) with a balanced budget (in the black, modestly, for 4 of the last 5 years) and a small but well-maintained plant consisting of a church and a rectory serving as a parish center. Parishioners feel that the parking lot is too small and that the undercroft needs work, but are otherwise satisfied with the parish plant. We benefit from an Historic Trust - an endowment (\$3.5 M) set up to preserve our historic building (175 years this year) - and, though we have no school of our own, we provide Board and volunteer support as well as major financial support to SS. James and John on Somerset St., the only African-American Catholic Elementary School in East Baltimore.

Demographically, our parishioners are a little older than the archdiocesan average (with the biggest difference in the percentage in their 60's). Parishioners have been members here a long time (74% over 10 yrs., vs. the archdiocesan average of 54%) and we travel a lot longer than average to get here, with 54% traveling more than 20 minutes, more than four times the average percentage for archdiocesan parishes. This strongly suggests that our parishioners have chosen St. Vincent's as their parish.

We are significantly more likely than the average parish to say our spiritual needs are being met here, that we feel we are valued members of the community, and that we have been encouraged in spiritual growth by someone in the parish. We are overwhelmingly (84%) "Very likely" to recommend this place to someone seeking a parish (vs. 51% archdiocesan average,  $z=1.06$ ).

We would welcome (we say by a small majority) the opportunity to share our faith with others (51% v. 40% archdiocesan average), though it turns out that when asked to be more specific, we are pretty comfortable engaging in such talk with adult family members and close friends, rather less so with our children, co-workers or neighbors. One advantage the survey reveals is that our parish vision aligns so closely with that of Pope Francis that we are about twice as likely as members of other parishes to discuss Francis' words with those around us. This could be a real opening if we were to feel comfortable exploiting it.

Our strongest points are the joy and excitement of the parishioners (52% ranking at the highest level, three times the archdiocesan parish average,  $z=2.04$ ), our engaging homilies (68%, also three times the archdiocesan parish average,  $z=2.17$ ), and our service to the poor (66%, again three times the archdiocesan parish average,  $z=2.06$ ). Asked if this parish "inspired them to be a better Christian and to share the joy of Christ with others," 64% (versus the archdiocesan parish average for this response, 28%,  $z=1.59$ ) replied "Absolutely!"

### 3. Challenges to Mission Readiness.

With that ringing endorsement of encouragement to share the joy of Christ with others, the question arises, “So what are we doing about it, and how well is it working?” If that question is to be answered in terms of simple church growth, the answer must be that - so far - we are not doing well. Our average attendance has been declining about 2% per year for several decades now, and while this is a small decline, it is a persistent one. One can die from a very small loss of blood if it continues long enough.

Granted, church growth is not coterminous with evangelization. Real evangelization has happened when someone hears the good news about God, even if they never set foot in a church. If the ever-changing banner hanging on the side of our church facing downtown Baltimore encourages one person to be more open to the good news about God, that’s evangelization. But full and complete evangelization, as we said earlier, is Trinitarian. Whichever step occurs first, complete evangelization leads to accepting good news about the Father who is creating a world out of merciful love (*hesed ve’emet Adonai l’olam*), about the eternal Word who proclaims and embodies this God, and about the Spirit who dwells in the church for the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and life everlasting. What can our parish offer to meet these challenges?

To answer this question we must understand it more fully. Our parish survey indicates that while we feel encouraged to announce the good news of God, we remain reluctant to actually do so. Why?

The largest single reason given was that we do not want to appear to be attempting to “push our own beliefs on others.” This answer was also chosen most often by parishioners of other parishes, but our ratio (57%) was even larger than theirs (30%,  $z=1.34$ ). Why this divergence of living faith and sharing faith? Why do we associate announcing the good news with being pushy? These are critical questions for us, for which the survey does not provide answers.

Perhaps part of the challenge is that many of us have witnessed, or been on the receiving end of, *malvangelization*: insistent, fear-laden bad news preaching about a God who is truly out to get you. Thus a hijacking of the perception of evangelization: our own working group exhibited dissonant reactions to and stated understandings of the word. Part of it may be the cost of our own progress: as Catholics move out of our self-contained culture and form alliances with other Christians, Jews, Muslims, and non-believers to advance the cause of justice and peace, we are reluctant to offend our new allies, and we are not well-versed in how to express our deeply held faith non-defensively. Part may be the influence of a “secular Catholicism,” agreeing to privatize religion with an increasingly limited place in the larger society.

We desire to be mission-ready at St Vincent de Paul Church. We desire to be a people who communicates the good news of God, and a people who welcomes anyone who has experienced this news as other than good. We look forward to answering the questions posed above.

#### 4. Planning.

The Mission Readiness Team finds the parish of St. Vincent de Paul Church is ready to approach our call to missionary conversion and evangelization creatively.

Over the past year we have dedicated ourselves to Pope Francis' vision of a year of mercy. Looking ahead, we are now considering a liturgical year of missionary discipleship, allowing the theme of evangelization to permeate the consciousness and life of the parish. We discussed: creating small learning groups to discover why we associate *announcing the good news* with *being pushy*; engaging newer parishioners more extensively in the liturgy; engaging our current children and youth more extensively in the liturgy; reaching out to those who have left our parish, to hear their stories; and addressing our willingness, individually and as a parish, to undergo personal missionary conversion in ways that compel us to share our joy and go beyond our comfort zone.

Further, we will seek ways to act upon the following:

- When our parishioners answer the question "Why are you here at St V's?" the stories tell of the good news of God. We wish to tap into this rich opportunity for evangelization.
- Our written survey responses indicated special interest in the practice of contemplative prayer, in the innate trust of the ministry of women in the Church, and in the welcoming of all who desire to hear the good news. We wish to ensure these interests are celebrated and honored.
- It is common for our parish to have visitors at mass (tourists, friends and others). We will seek to expand our greeters' ministry, becoming ever more intentionally inviting.
- Our mission to allow our church park to remain open to our poor and homeless neighbors means that visitors come in charity from many places. We are gradually improving communication with these, who thank us for our continuing witness to the least among us.
- We are in the process of creating new signage on our campus, indicating our welcome to all.
- All of our Eucharistic ministers and most of our lectors and liturgy planners are over age fifty. In order that the ministries of the church will be seen and known as *for all*, we are inviting a cohort of younger parishioners be trained in these ministries.

These plans and expectations will require the support of, and action by, a comprehensive cross-section of parishioners involved in the many ministries of education, of liturgy, social action – in short, by most of us who call St. Vincent de Paul Church our parish home. We trust that our self-stated enthusiasm for the task, with mutual encouragement, will help us in this process.

## 5. The Mission Readiness Team and process

Below are the members of the *Be Missionary Disciples* survey results review and reflection team.

- Jay Brown, parishioner
- Laureen Brunelli, Director of Evangelization
- Fr Richard Lawrence, Pastor
- Colleen McCahill, Pastoral Associate
- Peggy McMillan, parishioner
- Jenny Saccenti, parishioner
- Rowland Savage, parishioner
- Giuliana Valencia, parishioner
- Joe Yingling, Parish Council President

When we received the survey data, we published them on our website and invited all parishioners to read and reflect on them. After discussion at Parish Council and among staff, we convened a group that represented a broad cross-section of the parish; it includes newer members and those who have been here many years - men and women of different ages and life experiences. Our group met each month from June through September. We created a proposed timeline and agenda before the first meeting and distributed these along with copies of all the material that came from the Archdiocese, a copy of the original survey, and the Standard Deviations document sent us by Dr. Yeung. In our meetings, we examined and discussed all of these, including the many written responses. We considered our strengths, challenges, and opportunities in light of what we claimed about ourselves, and in the context of our parish mission. The terms *mission readiness* and *missionary conversion* were discussed, as we decided where these held meaning for us. We gave particular time and attention to our parish-wide approach to evangelization. We drafted the response, suggested changes and additions, and submitted it to the parish. With this document now shared with the Archdiocese, and with these considerations and planning process fresh in our minds and hearts, we await with considerable interest further information regarding the Archdiocesan Master Plan.