

INTERRELATING PARISHES: A CASE STUDY

The Catholic Communities of the City of Santa Monica *Future Search*

The Opportunity

For more than a decade, the three parishes of the city of Santa Monica have searched for a way to minister more effectively together. Limited resources, demographic changes and fewer presbyters signaled the need to collaborate. Conversations started, but then stalled due to lack of a clear, agreed-upon vision and path to achieve it.

In 2009, the three pastors of St. Anne's Church and Shrine, St. Clement's Church, and St. Monica's Catholic Community engaged two outside consultants, Fred Baumer, Ph.D. and Trish Vanni, M.Div. to guide them in a design that would preserve the essential, unique elements of each parish, while establishing a gifts- and resource-based model of collaboration.

The Approach: Tri-Parish Future Search

At our recommendation, Marvin Weisbord's large-group methodology called *Future Search* was chosen. *Future Search* brings an entire "system" into the room to reflect, dream and

design a desired future. In the course of planning for, participating in a three-day event, and following up with a change campaign, the parishioners, parish presbyters and staff take

ownership of their unique past, confirm their core present values, and envision a common future they will make happen. Participants are peers; each person is presumed to bring equal insights and gifts to the process. The organizing principle for the *Future Search* for the Churches of Santa Monica was the desire to create a shared future vision for calling the three communities into action over the next five years.

The Tri-Parish *Future Search* was shepherded by a twelve-person Task Group (core planning committee) and the two consultants who identified participants, produced the event,

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How the Future Search Weekend Worked

Friday evening at St. Clement's began with prayer, a "getting to know you" exercise and dinner

In first session, the sixty completed a past-appreciation exercise that helped them name their common life events and faith experiences amidst shared history – which included the challenges of the Northridge earthquake, immigration, homelessness, and riots. They discovered that they had an enormous amount in common.

In the "report outs," mixed parish groups spoke about how they were able to adapt to changing times; they reveled in the discovery that each parish was in its own way a "commuter parish," drawing from across parish lines; and noted that each had a focus on education, lay leadership, and social justice. They left Friday night energized by the ways in which they had shared their parish's stories, and the common ground they had uncovered.

Saturday – all day – at St. Anne's

The morning's focus was on identifying the unique strengths of individual parishes (their "prouds") and also identifying where the parishes could have been more collaborative (their "sorries"). The sixty participants, speaking in Spanish and English, realized they could have done even more if they had been sharing resources around spiritual development, preparation for ministry, serving in social justice, schools and education, to name just a few. By noon, they agreed they could have more impact on the greater community of Santa Monica if they collaborated.

On Saturday afternoon, nine mixed-parish groups first imagined what the connected parishes might look like in 2014 if resources were not an issue. In 20-minute entertaining skits, the groups presented their agreed-upon futures. Some themes emerged across the groups that would be confirmed in ten guiding principles Sunday morning.

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The Approach (cont.)

and supported subsequent communication. This Task Group included the parish pastors. Sixty stakeholders (20 from each parish), representing a broad range of interests, commitments and gifts were invited to participate in the three-day *Future Search* weekend event. (See below.)

The Follow-up Process

In the wake of the weekend gathering, a small group of Statement Crafters (9 people plus the consultants) examined the core values/guiding principles and action plans generated by the *Future Search*. Working back from them, this group refined the work begun by the 60-person group. The Statement Crafters prepared a proposed Mission and Vision statement for the “The Catholic Parishes of the city of Santa Monica” to be validated in Town Hall meetings that will take place in each of the parishes. This participative process begins with a recap of the experience and testimonials from the participants in the *Future Search*, the guiding principles and the newly-crafted vision statement. The Statement Crafters

parish’s feedback to refine and finalize the statements which are then presented in a summation meeting to each of the community’s leadership for action.



and egalitarian movement to the fullest possible participation by all *Future Search* attendees.

The use of all three sites, and the hospitality provided at each, served to build familiarity, comfort and connection. The three-day process allowed people to maintain the continuity of the event without requiring them to go off site and extract themselves from their lives for the entire weekend.

This grass-roots approach generated a level of commitment and enthusiasm among presbyters, staff and parishioners unseen in previous attempts at collaboration. Each parish believes it can preserve its unique history, call and identity, and also creatively interrelate with the other parishes to create a new identity of a Catholic presence in the City of Santa Monica. ■

For more information about consultations by Fred Baumer and Trish Vanni related to church planning and effectiveness, contact Trish Vanni at vanniconsulting@gmail.com or 952-484-1606.

Ingredients of Success

Fear of loss of identity and other factors contributed to past failures at generating a mutual plan. Language barriers also loomed as an issue for jointly generating a vision. A large percentage of the participants spoke Spanish as their primary language, and some had minimal English skills. Over the three days, the group creatively navigated translation issues, and moved to a model where people spoke in their primary language, with translation taking place at the tables. It

How it Worked (cont.)

Sunday at St. Monica’s – beginning with Mass and Breakfast.

The 7:30 a.m. worship demonstrated the 60 were no longer three groups of 20 people, but one united group connected through prayer and a common vision. Many later reported that they were really moved in the concelebrated morning Mass.

Afterwards, the group confirmed their ten principles, then divided into groups and laid out both short-term (6 months to 1 year) and long term (1-5 years) action plans based on the guiding principles. The guiding principles included:

1. Collaborative tri-parish leadership with mutually agreed upon authority and shared resources.
2. Deep cultural appreciation for each other while maintaining their unique parishi identities.
3. Joint communication (web, print and other media).
4. Experiences of common worship, festivals and social gatherings.
5. Financial synergy across the three parishes.
6. Shared vision for Catholic schools.
7. Collaborating on formation of children, youth and adults in their Catholic faith – in Catholic schools, religious education and youth programs and other settings.
8. Joint social justice outreach and speaking with one voice of advocacy
9. Invitation and formation of ministry leaders across parishes.
10. Building community across the parishes.

