

Diocese of Fort Worth Fort Worth, Texas

The Diocese of Fort Worth encompasses 28 counties in north-central Texas. The five counties that make up the greater Fort Worth metropolitan area have been experiencing tremendous population growth increasing by 880,000 people between 1990 and 2007, and projected increases of another 1,500,000 by 2030. This growth is reflected in Mass attendance which increased 31% between 1995 and 2005.

The Challenge

Given the explosive growth in the five county area, Bishop Vann needed to open new parishes. But before he could move ahead, he needed to know where the next parish should be located and how a new parish would affect surrounding parishes. More importantly, he needed a model for new parishes and support from pastors for making expansion plans. Historically parishes were established when lay leaders from a growing area petitioned the diocese which turned out to be rather haphazard and certainly not strategic. A methodical and data-driven process was required to make these decisions. Other related concerns for diocesan leadership involved the wisdom of relocating certain parishes, staffing for new parishes, and the best locations for opening new Catholic schools in underserved areas.

The Process

Bishop Vann stated in the forward to the final plan “To meet this challenge as best we can and to serve our people as faithfully as we can, we need to be good stewards of our resources. ...a response to this growth means looking forward and being ready...” The Diocese brought Meitler to provide a process and new solutions.

After helping to define the problem and customize a planning process, Meitler collected extensive data from many sources: demographics from national, regional, and local sources, parish and school statistics from the diocese and parishes, and the input of experts in community planning and development. Meitler took all the information and analyzed it to produce a presentation of key findings. The presentation gave Diocesan leaders a clear picture of the challenges and opportunities, taking complex data and packaging it into a relevant and compelling story of the past and future. A Diocesan Planning Committee was formed. They worked along alongside Meitler to interpret information, pose challenging questions, and help shape the eventual plan. The committee consisted of pastors in affected areas, parish lay leaders with knowledge of their local communities, and experts in real estate development and municipal planning.

An important step was engaging clergy, parish staffs, and lay leaders in forging a vision and a plan. Meitler led the Diocese to formulate a model for parishes in the future, outlining the underlying assumptions for establishing new parishes. The model addressed the preferred size and maximum size, criteria for parish sites, and models for sponsoring new schools. At a key point in the process, the consultants conducted consultation sessions with parish leaders in various regions. This inclusive approach assured the best wisdom from leaders in the affected communities was brought to bear on the recommendations. It also assured there would be support for the plan because there was honest dialog as the plan was being shaped.

The Results

The end result was a plan with specific recommendations to respond to the challenge. The plan gave clear and compelling rationale for the recommendations and provided strategies for implementation. Some recommendations called for new parishes, others for relocating parishes, some for expansion on current sites, and others identified where new schools should be considered. As an outcome individual parishes would know the assumptions they should use to formulate their local master site plans. The resulting study and plan were far more extensive and complete than could have been accomplished internally. Meitler brought an outside perspective, and the traditional thinking about parish and school growth was stretched. Spin offs from the study were new school feasibility studies for a Diocesan high school and parish elementary school, both of which are underway.

The Diocese of Fort Worth has a direction to follow. Rather than make choices one at a time, leaders can see a series of choices that happen in succession years into the future. There is an understanding of the priorities and a preliminary timeline for implementation. The implementation presumes the plan must be updated every five years to assess progress and respond to changes in the economy and the realities on the ground. In the end, Diocesan leaders have the information they need to be much smarter in where money is spent, more successful in collaborating, and more able to connect plans for new parishes with plans for existing parishes.