



January 28, 2010

Jessica White Associates (JWA) was asked to provide strategic planning services to Saint Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church (STA). The first step in the process began with four focus groups held at the church on Sunday, January 17, 2010 from 11:30 am – 6:00 pm. The purpose of the focus groups was to determine what ministries are most important to the congregation and what they would like to see expanded or enhanced in the coming years. The original thought was to separate the attendees by length of membership. This thinking was based on a perception that long-time members had different expectations for St. Thomas than newer members. Interestingly, the priorities identified by most participants in the various groups are very similar

### **Methodology**

The following questions were asked of the four focus groups:

1. What were the things you appreciated most about St. Thomas when you joined?  
What things do you appreciate most today?
2. What are the three greatest problems in the St. Thomas neighborhood or the Indianapolis community?
3. What are your three highest priorities for St. Thomas?
4. What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of St. Thomas Aquinas and the people with whom we intersect?

### **Findings**

1. What were the things you appreciated most about St. Thomas when you joined?  
What things do you appreciate most today?

When asked about what drew you to St. Thomas we repeatedly heard such things as: the welcoming atmosphere, diversity, social justice emphasis, post Vatican II attitude, and meaningful liturgies. One additional recurring sentiment was the school and the strong sense of community.

A good number of individuals came to the church for a funeral, a school activity or an event other than a worship experience. Repeatedly we heard the phrase



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“people reached out to us”. “There was a warmth and caring exchange that continued over time until we just decided to become a part of it.” A number of other individuals indicated they wanted a neighborhood church. Now that they have moved out of the neighborhood they travel to their parish and would now not consider “a neighborhood church” – they have a church worth traveling to. One individual described himself as coming from a rural background, very conservative and not the least bit of diversity in his life. College opened his eyes and the members of this parish influenced him. Reputation brought him – the openness about sexual orientation, racially diversity, and seeking truth keeps him here.

One comment worth noting was the perception that the church is not as progressive and cutting edge as in the earlier years. “There seems to be a shift and a lack of single mindedness”. Around that statement it was mentioned that perhaps all the other churches have caught up with us. It is possible that some appreciated the recognition (as evidenced by the article provided us from Reader’s Digest magazine) that came with those early decisions to engage in social justice issues of that time and may be equating the lack of public attention to the churches external activities as a signal that *we have lost our edge*. One member who spoke fondly of the activities in the 60’s of STA concluded by saying, “Our basic values haven’t changed – friendships”.

Communication is an area where a number of individuals wanted improvement. There is a real need to get things to the parish members expeditiously. This was especially noted around interactions between the school and the church. It was voiced that the staff will not send things out for various group meetings by school parents. Equally imported was the fact that a number of people do not feel the bulletin is being used effectively.

In the area of music, it was mentioned that we are not cutting edge – we are predictable. The sense of participation is not there. Some perceive the worship to be less engaging and lively than in past years. Others see the liturgies as a form of worship. Many mentioned a love for the dynamic liturgies from today’s pulpit. There was considerable appreciation expressed around the style of liturgy – the perceived intellectual challenge offered from Father Steve. Another individual noted that it is “rare in church – but frequent at STA” to be spiritually challenged and intellectually stimulated. Further, it was stated that Father is very respectful of the church’s traditions.



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The overwhelming message we can take from this question is the fact that with few exceptions, the same things that once drew individuals to the church seem to be the same things that keep them in the church today.

2. What are the three greatest problems in the St. Thomas neighborhood or the Indianapolis community?

The problems identified in the neighborhood were about hunger, poverty, crime, and a safe place for children to play. The economic challenges of today undermine the stability of STA. The neighborhood is not primarily the congregation. It was expressed that for STA to meet those needs “we must go beyond words to take action to help others instead of accepting the societal norm of WIFM”.

3. What are your three highest priorities for St. Thomas?

At first blush, priorities can be broadly separated into an internal and external focus – internally: spiritual life, programs and vibrant liturgies, financial sustainability and continued focus on diversity; externally – food pantry, enhanced social justice programs, and public schools.

A large majority see the STA School as vital to the growth and ministry of the parish. The school brought people to the parish, keeps people at the parish, and provides an avenue for us “to live out what we say we are”. There were frequent references to the excellence of the school and its teachers.

Several commented on the need for STA to focus and build a plan for the integration of outreach ministries so it appears that STA “owns” the issue and serves to address it externally. “The focus is too broad and we do not have sufficient resources to make a significant difference. We are lots of talk and no action.” If “focus” becomes a priority for the congregation, resources will need to be redirected in order to make a desired impact.

Financial stability is a goal for a number of those responding in the focus groups. It was commented that STA “goes in spurts” when financial planning and responsibility become the focus. Because the school is a ministry of the church and is seen as a priority for all the reasons previously identified, any financial plan for the future should include the school. Clearly, it is a resource and a responsibility – one that most individuals see as a priority. It is also interesting to note, that while the parish school is a priority a number of individuals stated the public school system needs the support of the church in some fashion. A



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number of attendees mentioned the need for an endowment to ensure future stability.

A core group of individuals said the same thing in various ways; some phrasing it negatively – some phrasing it more positively. Either way, a core group of individuals want to see priority given to the following areas:

- Cutting edge recognition
  - Be more risk taking
  - Get people engaged and doing something under the “Church Banner”
  - Create a focus
  - Continue to grow the school & church together
  - Utilize the web
4. What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of St. Thomas Aquinas and the people with whom we intersect?

The responses to the last question are congruent with the problems cited for the neighborhood and the surrounding community and priorities identified for the church as a whole. We have provided a listing of respondent’s comments rather than summarizing. These are grouped into five areas of focus for ease of review.

### **Worship & the Arts**

- Full-time Music Director
- Sound System
- Those with hearing problems cannot participate in the good ideas being shared
- Balance between traditional liturgy and being more socially progressive
- More meaningful liturgy
- Foster & challenge adult spirituality through a vibrant liturgy and formation
- Involve children more in liturgy
- Liturgies that include input from all members
- Improve liturgy – hospitality, involvement, younger people
- Improve music



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### **Education & Formation**

- Retreat weekends
- Challenge each other to live the radical gospel
- What do we do to keep our children committed to system of values?
- A way to share history with the younger generation
- Focus on spiritual life to attract guests
- Create a project to bring together the generations
- Vibrant Liturgy, Education, Youth programs—that are funded with a spiritual part to it. Must have staff to manage it. A great Party Church
- DRE—Director of Religious Education
- Effort to bring kids into the church (Like the old youth center with the 3 churches in the area)
- Strong School—improve Teacher Retention
- Ongoing faith formation and renew adult education
- Make parish history more visible

### **Care & Nurture**

- Hospitality of the parish
- Acknowledge volunteers—thank you's, spontaneous come & eat, instead of always fundraising (There were frequent references to the need for more opportunities to eat together.)
- Coffee before church – Welcoming
- Men & Women's CRHP group
- Expand the relationship of our school and church
- Pull our parish community together more as a community to make it easier for us to serve the community outside our walls



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### **Stewardship & Administration**

- Work space – safe for Haiti shipping containers
- Invest in professional staff (Parish)-go-to person
- Build endowment
- Those with hearing problems cannot participate in the good ideas being shared
- Keep in mind the possibility of expanding when DRE comes available
- Use the talent we have in the parish—devise a plan
- Communication!
- Need to know more about how the parish is run – who does what, who to contact
- Better cohesion to sustained fundraising
- Ways to make service to the church and teams more appealing and less boring
- Improve the structure without destroying its existing goodness
- Improve communication within the parish

### **Mission & Outreach**

- STA assert its leadership in Catholic community in a project (like JCC lecture series)
- More Interfaith activities – partnership
- WYLD's (Archdiocese) to establish STA as a mission of and for those with disabilities to participate
- CRHP groups to take on a project
- Grow Membership
- Grow in awareness
- Develop definition of stewardship of the community
- Reconnect to larger church regarding religious vocation
- Keep spirituality as the foundation of doing social justice
- Remain a separate parish, but be more cooperative
- Shine our light more as part of our neighborhood (community garden for neighborhood)
- Enhance/increase the social justice outreach





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**Stewardship & Administration (continued)**

- Find ways to attract young adults without families
- Grow diversity of membership & school

The next step will be to incorporate the findings from the focus groups into the committee's plans for the strategic planning day Saturday, February 20, 2010.



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