

### **Our Lady of the Lake Chooses Its Path**

**By Fr. Stan Mader, Pastor of Our Lady of the Lake Catholic Church, Mound**

In the summer of 2001, Our Lady of the Lake in Mound commissioned the preparation of a strategic plan for the parish. Gathering about 15 parish leaders and staff members representing all aspects of the parish, and facilitated by Alan Meitler of Meitler Consultants, Inc., we drafted a plan that included a demographic survey, parish mission statement, visions and goals for the entire parish, staff needs, a facilities plan, and special attention to school budget and enrollment. This drove the financial plan that would demand a balanced budget, something we had not attained the two previous years. The plan was presented to the parish in May 2002, and included a recommendation for a capital campaign. This process has been described to us as “an excellent example of data-driven decision-making, complete with unexpected results and a unique approach to capital improvements.” We have been encouraged to share our experience with others.

Prior to the commission of the strategic plan, there were forces allied in the parish that wanted to expand the school. Their desire was to have two classes for each grade level. At the time, this was a trend common throughout the Archdiocese. Doing this would require adding rooms to the school, estimated at \$2,000,000.

The demographic study provided our strategic plan with data that showed “[t]he population of school-aged children is projected to decline over the next decade in the City of Mound and in Hennepin County.” In fact, the number of children under five in the school district has dropped over 25% in the past 10 years. Consequently, while physical improvements to the school were recommended, there was not a recommendation to expand the school. In retrospect, I have been very grateful that the parish has followed the recommendations in the report. We have witnessed a decline in enrollment, as forecast, and baptisms dropped from over 60, down to a three-year average of 40.

Another aspect of the strategic plan was the development of a ten-year capital improvement program for the parish and school, detailed for seven years. What was unique about this program was that parishioners were told upfront that it would be a pay-as-you-go capital improvement program. In other words, the projects would only be undertaken as the funds were received from the capital campaign to actually pay for the project.

The strategic plan indicated the needs. From that, larger projects were selected for a draft of the capital campaign needs. This was reviewed at a number of meetings with parishioners, and then revised based on indications of support by over 100 personal interviews. These interviews, conducted by the campaign coordinator, Jim Ernhart, also allowed parishioners to raise concerns about all aspects of the parish. Prioritization of the projects were made clear as the campaign got underway in the fall of 2002.

Our campaign fell short of the goal, so a special allocation committee was formed to determine which projects would be done. It included input from both the maintenance and finance committees. To date we have replaced the church roof, installed a new sound system and purchased some computer equipment for the school. This summer we are repairing the bell tower and replacing all the windows in the school, along with other school improvements.

The strategic plan made us face a number of issues. There were programs that needed to be implemented to support the mission of the parish and the changing needs of its parishioners. We realized we could not continue to run at deficits, while at the same time significant money had to be infused into our buildings, almost all 38-53 years old. In order to maintain our financial and program goals, some staff had to be cut, and we introduced multi-age classrooms into the school – using three classrooms for two grades instead of four. So far each multi-age room has had a waiting list, while traditional rooms have a bit of room.

It was not without pain or mistakes, but this past fiscal year we showed a substantial net gain without major gifts helping us through. I'm convinced solid data in our strategic plan helped us catch serious problems two years ago while we could still recover. It appears we are in an enviable position right now, and may be poised to expand our programs and do necessary building repair in an orderly fashion, without incurring additional long or short-term debt.

*Newsletter Issue: July 2004*