

Parish checkups measure 'how Holy Spirit is guiding us'

WEST BABYLON, N.Y. – Seven Long Island parishes are giving themselves a spiritual checkup – conducting surveys to find out how actively engaged their parishioners are.

"It's like going to a doctor," said Marie Guido, stewardship coordinator at St. Gerard Majella Church in Port Jefferson Station. "You get your vital signs checked to see where you're doing good and what you need to work on."

Working with the Gallup Organization, those parishes met earlier this summer at Our Lady of Grace Church in West Babylon to discuss the findings of the survey that each has taken of their parishioners and to begin planning ways to draw parishioners into more active engagement.

St. Gerard's has been conducting "membership engagement" surveys since 2001. The other parishes are new to the process.

Al Winseman, global leader for Gallup's Faith Practices division, referred to a book that Gallup has published about how parishes and other congregations have been able to use the survey. "St. Gerard's here on Long Island is one chapter. They're one of our success stories."

Monsignor William Hanson, pastor of St. Gerard's, said that in 2001 he and Monsignor Christopher Heller, then co-pastor of St. Gerard's and now pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Babylon, were looking for ways to learn why people were coming to the parish. "We had stopped asking why people weren't coming. We wanted know why they were coming, but we didn't know where to start."

The surveys, they learned from attending a conference that Gallup sponsored, had a proven track record of measuring the health of a parish. The surveys also offered ways to help any faith community to understand its weaknesses and build on its successes, Monsignor Hanson said.

"I saw that being pastor without doing surveys like these was like driving the old 1959 Chevy I had in the seminary. The dashboard blew a fuse so I didn't have a working speedometer, gas gauge or odometer," Monsignor Hanson said. "It ran, but I didn't know how fast, how far or how long I could go."

Through the surveys, Winseman said, "parishes can stop guessing about what to do

and plan how to do it. Without measurement, we are just guessing.”

“We are very excited that parishes are grabbing hold of the Gallup Survey and planning process in our diocese,” said Laurie Whitfield of the diocesan Office of Parish Stewardship. She described the survey as “a valuable tool” for measuring spiritual development, which she said is more difficult to gauge than other characteristics, such as financial status.

Sister Maryanne Fitzgerald, a Sister of Charity who is diocesan chancellor, spoke briefly at the seminar, encouraging parishes to use the survey to foster spiritual growth. The diocese is underwriting most of the expense, Whitfield said.

The survey asks questions that measure how engaged their parishioners feel. “Engagement is not the same as involvement,” said Tim Simon, a senior seminar leader and consultant for the Gallup Organization. “It’s emotional – how I feel about what I do in the parish. It’s about emotional connection.”

“We’re hoping that the survey will help us to see how the Holy Sprit is guiding us as a parish,” said Steve Benthall, pastoral associate and business manager of St. Margaret of Scotland Church in Selden.

Through the survey, Simon said, “you can start looking for problems before they become major” and look for successes to build on.

Some of the questions focus on whether parishioners know what is expected of them, whether they feel their participation is important and their opinions count, whether their spiritual needs are being met in that parish, and whether the parish’s leadership cares about them personally.

Other questions ask whether individual parishioners spend time daily in prayer, and whether their faith gives meaning, purpose and peace. Some questions also measure whether the parishioner’s faith is lived out in his or her life as seen by willingness to forgive others, take unpopular stands and speak kindly to people needing encouragement.