



INTO THE DEEP



DIOCESE of
MADISON

A Reflection on the First Six Months of Into the Deep

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We have just passed the six-month point since Into the Deep started in earnest throughout the diocese, a change marked most noticeably by the priest reassignments and shifts in Mass schedules on July 1, 2023. This time has been one of challenge, adaptation, and adjustment, for our priests, deacons, parish and school staffs, and lay faithful. I am grateful and pleased for the generous spirit, hard work and sacrificial generosity exhibited by so many during the initial phase of the implementation of this ambitious strategic plan.

Since it is good to review the vision and purpose of projects this big, to renew our understanding of why we are doing all of this, let me return to the original data which told us in 2022 that the number of Baptisms, marriages, First Communions, Mass attendance and children enrolled in religious instruction in our diocese had all experienced a precipitous decline in the last ten years. We launched Go Make Disciples in 2020 to renew our understanding of the Gospel and the urgency of evangelization, while we created opportunities to equip our people to deepen their own faith and to share it with others. We want to reverse these downward statistics.

Understanding that we can only realize the vision of Go Make Disciples if we adapt the structures of our diocese and parishes to move from maintenance to mission, we have undertaken this ambitious effort, Into the Deep, to realign our priests, lay leaders, parishes, and resources to be more resourceful and strategic, seeking to renew the foundations of our diocese for the decades to come. We are ultimately moving from 102 to 30 parishes, and from 62 to 30 pastors, not initially closing any church buildings, but seeking to streamline and unify the many aspects of the Church's mission, ministry, and function. Six months into our efforts, I offer here some blessings and challenges that have emerged in this ambitious process. Being a hope-filled person, I will start with the blessings first.

After many years of consistent decline, Mass attendance across the diocese is up more than 4% this past year. I am confident this increase will continue as we seek to evangelize, catechize, and invite Catholics to return to the central meaning and power of the Eucharist. With a reduction in the number of Masses, many people have commented on the impact of worshiping in a full church—the vibrancy of the music, the volume of the responses, the sense of strength and support we receive from one another in prayer. Others have commented favorably on experiencing other churches, being part of a larger community than before, enjoying the rotation and variety of priests in their pastorate, and getting to know the blessings and people of other communities.

Our priests are now working as teams, not celebrating more than three Masses a weekend, many choosing to live together, all of them joining in prayer and fellowship, and feeling each other's support and help. As a team, they can more readily share their gifts with each other and the people they are serving. With fewer pastors, the parochial vicars have more time and energy for the priestly work they desire to do. This priestly team approach is a significant adjustment for our priests and I am grateful for their willing generosity to embrace such a new dynamic.

Parish staff can now share programs, best practices, and common wisdom across the pastorate, and ideally, more resources will now be available to invest in the needed staff to fuel evangelization, formation, catechesis, charitable service, and youth ministry. The diocese is offering a centralized accounting service to the parishes, which leaves rightful autonomy to the parishes, but eliminates duplication, errors, and needless expense.

What are the challenges? The physical distance in many pastorates can be daunting for priests and staff to travel. Priests and people will need a longer time to connect and bond with each other as a unified community. The priests right now are in a period of enormous adjustment and adaptation, learning the multiple details of every parish. Some people are grieving the loss of a beloved pastor, their favorite Mass, and the people they knew well at that Mass. Lay staff have retired or resigned, creating pressure on those who remain, as they sustain the many parish events and programs, especially in the areas of catechesis and formation. Some are concerned about the finances and how the resources of each current parish will be unified in the new reality. Both diocesan and parish leadership will continue to strategize and embrace new ideas and possibilities to resolve these challenges.

It would be naïve to think that an endeavor as far-reaching and strategic as Into the Deep could unfold without some problems and challenges. Nevertheless, I and many others throughout the diocese have confidence in Divine Providence and the work of the Holy Spirit in this tremendous effort. We have a unique and precious chance to renew the mission and structures of our beloved local Church, so that we are not simply enduring or maintaining, but in fact, are flourishing and growing as we boldly go forth to make disciples, to preach the Gospel to every creature and to baptize in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Our initiatives will succeed and bear fruit beyond our imagining if each of us remains faithful to our Baptismal calling and keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, our only hope!