

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI PARISH WICHITA, KANSAS

In 1985, seventeen years after the vision of stewardship was first brought to St. Francis of Assisi, the first Stewardship Committee was formed. It consisted of twelve members selected by the Pastor on the basis of their commitment to the Eucharist and to the Stewardship Way of Life. The committee met weekly to study, refine and further develop the Parish structure to ensure that the gifts of time and talent were utilized so that all parishioners had the opportunity to serve and be served. As the commitment to the Stewardship Way of Life continued to grow within the parish family, the Stewardship Committee expanded to include twenty-two members ranging in age from the early thirties to mid sixties.

The mission of the Stewardship Committee is to develop and foster a Christian community atmosphere whereby the spiritual and social needs of parishioners can be realized through a total stewardship program of time, talent and treasure resulting in a sense of belonging, involvement and commitment for each parishioner. Out of this mission flows the responsibility for conducting annual stewardship renewals, overseeing the stewardship educational process in all areas and meeting with visiting representatives from other parishes worldwide sharing our stewardship experiences. The members of the committee continue to educate themselves by attending the annual National Catholic Stewardship Conference and other diocesan stewardship conferences and seminars.

Stewardship education is a year-round priority which emphasizes the spiritual, and incorporates the elements of our Mission Statement: *"The mission of St Francis of Assisi Catholic Parish is to nourish our love of God through Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit Centered in the Eucharist; we are developing a faith community through prayer, education, worship and Christian fellowship. As stewards of God's love, we strive to share our gifts and talents for the service of God and all His people."*

Every effort is made to include all ages: for our children and youth (K-12), a stewardship curriculum for our Catholic schools and our Parish School of Religion (CCD) is being utilized to instruct the students on how to respond to and nurture the call to discipleship resulting in a lifelong Stewardship Way of Life. For Seniors there is Harvest House and the Over-50 Club through which these parishioners involve themselves in Christian fellowship, prayer, service projects and further religious education. We have an ongoing Adult Education Program open to young adults through senior citizens. Planning and organization is important as we have a Director of Religious Education and Parish Director of Stewardship who oversee the implementation of our Pastoral Plan.

Enrollment in the parish grade school is 787. Our Diocesan Catholic High School has 272 students from St. Francis and there are 512 in our Parish School of Religion. The following groups participate in service projects: Eighth Grade group, CYO, Confirmation Classes and Catholic Scout Groups. There is a monthly Youth Mass in which the youth plan and participate, and a week long Catechetical Program in the summer. The educational process also includes: a Welcoming' Committee for new members, Bible study groups, prayer groups, speaking with new parishioners about stewardship, presentations to groups within the parish and to RCIA classes, regular communications in the parish newspaper, The Vernacular and stewardship publications as inserts in the newspaper and in the bulletin.

The Annual Stewardship Renewal Process consisting of communication, education and follow-up is the highlight of a year-round effort. The Renewal addresses the stewardship of time, talent and treasure by focusing on the spiritual and follows the precepts in the parish's Mission Statement. It takes place in a four week period ending with the weekend before Thanksgiving when the Time and Talent Forms and Treasure Cards are returned in order to focus on giving back to God with a grateful heart.

All of the following are part of the Renewal Process: the Pastor's homilies at Mass, lay witness presentations, parish newspaper articles on stewardship, spotlighting all the parish organizations, bulletin notices and a Stewardship Fair. A special mailing of Time and Talent Forms and Treasure Cards includes the parish booklet describing organizations and

activities. The annual Parish Dinner provides a forum for the Pastoral Council to recognize accomplishments of parish organizations. Youth are included in the Renewal Process and receive their own Time and Talent Forms and envelopes, and the Pastor gives special homilies at the daily school Masses.

The Renewal Process addresses and furthers the stewardship of time, talent and treasure by giving the overall aspects of stewardship for a better understanding, especially for new parishioners. It provides parishioners the opportunity to make further discernment of their talents, evaluate their commitment of time and make an examination of the portion of their treasure they return to God. After prayerful discernment, all parishioners are asked to return their Time and Talent Forms and Treasure Cards because this written agreement reinforces their commitment.

Stewardship as a way of life was first implemented at St. Francis of Assisi in 1968 when Father Thomas McGread arrived as Pastor after having accepted the challenge to shepherd what was then considered a renegade parish. He did not come empty handed as he brought with him a vision from the words of St. Peter: *"As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace."* (1 Peter 4:10)

This vision, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was not to be denied. Father Tom's message was simple: Strive to share our gifts of time, talent and treasure for the service of God and all of His people. Do this out of thanksgiving to God for all that He has given us. Having initiated the Stewardship Way of Life, he encouraged this stewardship-inspired parish to grow and prosper: There was a sense of unity, harmony and spirituality as never before within the parish.

The parish's commitment to the Stewardship Way of Life brought about a tremendous growth in spirituality and service. Perpetual Adoration began more than 11 years ago and continues 24 hours each day, seven days a week. More than 500 participate in the devotion. The Stewardship Way of Life has significantly contributed to helping develop eight Diocesan priests and six religious from St. Francis since 1968.

More than 70 groups, ranging from the spiritual to the social, minister to the various needs of parishioners and in the community, all contributing to the continuing growth in spirituality in the parish. Some 1,820 volunteers participate in one or more groups.

This growth in spirituality has brought about great changes. Those 600 families in 1968 have grown to 2,600 today, despite the fact that a new parish was formed next to St. Francis 16 years ago, taking over 40% of the families at that time. 85% of our parishioners attend weekend Masses, and approximately 300 adults and 350 children attend the daily Masses. Each year the RCIA Program averages 35 catechumens and candidates.

Community outreach flows naturally from this way of life as evidenced by the active support and presence in charities throughout the community. Members support and volunteer at a medical clinic set up for the "working poor" which is open five days a week. Others help at a shelter for homeless families, a home for pregnant women, a shelter for abused wives and children, blood drives and a food bank for those in need. One group has raised more than \$200,000 by setting up auctions to aid those with muscular dystrophy.

What is unique about St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Parish? What is it that attracts over 85% of our parishioners to one of our seven weekend Masses? Why do others want to be a part of this parish? .

We believe the answer is found in the commitment of parishioners who want to be a part of the more than 70 groups and activities of the parish which reach out to all ages in worship and activities. This belonging makes its presence felt in the contributions to the parish each week. The average family income for St. Francis parishioners is approximately \$40,000 per year, of which 5% is returned to God in contributions which amounts to \$80,000 per week. One of the many benefits is tuition-free schools giving all children the opportunity for a Catholic education.

We have five music groups, i.e., choirs, ensembles, and organists, pianists and other instrumentalists. The directors of these groups and 125 members serve as volunteers as part of their stewardship. 40 Parish School of Religion (CCD) teachers and aides are all volunteers. Also volunteering as part of their stewardship are 24 teachers and 24 youth

aides for the Preschool Sunday School Program, 23 teachers for Confirmation classes and 45 sponsors and leaders for the RCIA Program.

This commitment to living the Stewardship Way of Life by parishioners was naturally ingrained in the families. There are many second and third generation families in the parish living the Stewardship Way of Life, and many others are spread throughout the country fostering the concept. It is this sense of ownership in the parish that helps develop spirituality and the ongoing activities of St. Francis of Assisi.

Spirituality, hospitality and service remain the bedrock of what it means to belong to St. Francis of Assisi. This is witnessed by the ongoing Perpetual Adoration, devotion to Mary and the religious vocations that have been nurtured at St. Francis. Further witness is given by our ministry to the less fortunate through community outreach activities.

It is this ongoing conversion of parishioners and priests that makes St. Francis a vibrant, growing, spirit-filled community of believers. It is the strength of our parishioners' response to the Stewardship Way of Life that is unique.

What have we learned that can be of value to other parishes on the same journey? The pastor's support is the key to success. Stewardship, presented in a spiritual manner, will be seen as an invitation to participate. An active Stewardship Committee is essential to ensure that the process is implemented and ongoing. A parish mission statement that encompasses and provides for all aspects of parish life should be in place and regularly evaluated.

This way of life, this invitation and call to discipleship, totally within the spirit of the U. S. Bishop's 1992 Pastoral Letter, Stewardship, A Disciple's Response, had its beginnings at St. Francis of Assisi some 24 years in advance of the Pastoral Letter. It was because of what happened at St. Francis of Assisi as parishioners embraced the Stewardship Way of Life that the Wichita Diocese became the first fully Stewardship Diocese in the country in 1935.

The Stewardship Way of Life at St. Francis is the culmination of many years of effort by many parishioners. It is a conversion process that does not emphasize the treasure portion of stewardship but rather the time and talent components. Once involved with time and talent, treasure naturally follows. It is not a quick fix or an overnight occurrence, but is the result of a prayerful discernment of one's gifts and how best to share those gifts with the parish community and the Universal Church.

How do we sum up thirty years of living the Stewardship Way of Life? The torch carried by a man of God - the challenge issued by the Holy Spirit - words heard by a people of God - the call embraced and acted upon by many children of God - gifts shared - serving one another - reaching out to all - Christ centered - all these concepts and so much more carry this message down through the years. A parish, a people of God, was inspired and challenged and then responded with great dedication and perseverance. St. Francis of Assisi invites others to follow:

"As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace."