



## INTO THE DEEP



### *A Reflection on Our Current Reality and the Path Forward*

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August 30, 2022

As disciples and priests of Jesus Christ, we know that nothing happens outside of God's providence and foreknowledge. Every event – no matter how challenging or confusing it may be when it happens, or how unrelated it may appear to be to other events – is in fact willed by God for our good, if not directly then at least permissively. This is the teaching of our faith. “We know that in everything God works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

God's action of creation, redemption, and sanctification, which He marvelously fulfilled and revealed in the Paschal Mystery is the ultimate truth and meaning of human existence. It underlies all other realities, including our current reality in the Diocese of Madison. It is important that we remember this as we courageously follow the Lord Jesus' call to put out into the deep. Equally important, however, is that we honestly and truthfully face our current reality. For as the Lord Jesus says, “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). For us this means that we acknowledge and accept the difficult truths of our current reality, so that together we are free to follow Him into a brighter future for our local Church, that is, the Diocese of Madison.

Over the past five months, PartnersEdge, LLC, and the Into the Deep Strategic Planning Team have been working hard gathering and analyzing various data sets, including demographic data, parish and school data, financial and giving data, sacramental and priest data, historical data, etc. This professional, comprehensive, and thorough effort has led to the creation of a Current Reality Report, which spells out with great clarity and insight our current reality in the Diocese of Madison.

In particular, the Current Reality Report shows us:

- The total population across the Diocese is growing.
- We are losing people, especially our younger people; and we are aging.
- Fewer and fewer people are attending Mass.
- Significantly fewer people are receiving Sacraments.
- Faith Formation enrollment is in a free fall, while School enrollment is holding relatively steady.
- We have significantly fewer priests than in the past, but we project to be relatively stable into the future.



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- People who give donate about 2% of their income; with fewer older people giving more these days.
- At present, we are facing financial challenges impacting our mission and our employees.

When considering these 8 “takeaways” from the Current Reality Report together it is obvious that we are facing some significant challenges. But this probably comes as no surprise. Many of these “broken trends” we encounter daily in our parishes and schools. And these issues are not new; most have been building for quite some time. Recognizing this, the diocese has made attempts at various points over the past few decades to tackle some of these and other pressing issues. Parishes have clustered or merged, priests have taken on additional responsibilities, slight modifications have been made. But, despite the best of intentions, most of these efforts have been inadequate, incomplete, and/or directed towards symptoms rather than root causes. With some notable exceptions, most dioceses in the country have tried to “tweak” or “band-aid” these growing problems rather than ask, “what if God is inviting us to re-imagine what a parish can and needs to be in an increasingly post-Christian culture?”

Once again, we face significant challenges. And this necessitates a significant and bold response. Now is the time for us to look reality square in the face, see the truth, and with boundless hope and trust in Jesus Christ courageously put out into the deep to re-imagine what a parish can and needs to be if we are going to fulfill our mandate to go make disciples. We must be willing to let go of the past – or any other attachments that may hinder us – to follow Him into a new and brighter future, that is, into a healthier and holier reality. In the words of St. Peter, “Master, we have toiled all night and took nothing. But at your word [we] will let down the nets” (Luke 5:5). May God guide us, and may He grant us the grace, courage, generosity, and faith of St. Peter to follow Him into the deep and into a new reality!

Noted Catholic historian Christopher Dawson expressed it well, “The Church as a divine society possesses an internal principle of life which is capable of assimilating the most diverse materials and imprinting her own image upon them. Inevitably in the course of history there are times when this spiritual energy is temporarily weakened or obscured, and then the Church tends to be judged as a human organization and identified with the faults and limitations of its members. But always the time comes when she renews her strength and once more puts her inherent divine energy in the conversion of new peoples and the transformation of old cultures.” In God’s providence, now is that time for the Diocese of Madison.

*Put out into the deep and lower your nets for a catch. -Luke 5:4*