

PRIESTS IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO ARE LEADING IN A RENEWED CHURCH

Case Study



Catholic Leadership
INSTITUTE

THE CHALLENGE

Mirroring national trends, the Archdiocese of Chicago was struggling with declining priestly vocations as well as a legacy structure of outdated parish buildings, programs and ministries that were built and initiated to serve the needs of Catholics of an earlier time. That time experienced higher rates of participation and church attendance, with greater numbers of active priests, religious and lay volunteers.

Today, due to parish consolidations, one priest might manage two or three parishes along with all the needs and demands that go with that commitment. Couple this with the financial pressures of managing parish budgets, where revenues can easily fall short of expenses, and these factors have made it challenging for parish leadership to minister in an evangelizing spirit to parishioners.

The Archdiocese of Chicago serves the pastoral and spiritual needs of 2.2 million Catholics in 216 parishes within a 1,411 square-mile area, making it the third largest diocese in the U.S.

Within the archdiocese, Sunday Mass attendance has declined 35 percent since 2002. In the past ten years, baptisms have declined 40 percent; weddings are down 33 percent (and down 58.5 percent since 2004), and vocations to the priesthood have declined 43 percent.

To address these challenges with the goal of a fully alive Church, filled with life and the joy of serving Christ, Cardinal Blase J. Cupich, Archbishop of Chicago, embarked on an ambitious journey of renewal called “Renew My Church” for the Archdiocese of Chicago.



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—Cardinal Blase J. Cupich

Integral to this archdiocesan renewal was the need to “right size” the archdiocese to reflect demographic changes and to support in a much more intentional and committed way, the smaller pool of priests.

The archdiocese would help priests continue to care for the pastoral and spiritual needs of parishioners and support them in developing and fostering the skillsets needed for the new reality of parish consolidations. “We were convinced that bold action was needed if we were going to pass on our faith to future generations of Catholics,” said Cardinal Cupich.

In 2017, the Archdiocese of Chicago embarked on the five-year process of reducing the number of parishes from 360 down to 220. Most parishes would be reconfigured in clusters of 2-3 merged parishes which became worship sites. Effective execution of this monumental change taking place in the archdiocese also necessitated the need to change how it looked at and supported its priests.

THE SOLUTION - LEADING IN A RENEWED CHURCH

To assist with this effort, the Archdiocese of Chicago partnered with Catholic Leadership Institute (CLI) to ensure the achievement of its renewal initiative goals. Mr. Thomas Lenz, Leadership Consultant from Catholic Leadership Institute said, “The priests had to take on new roles that they maybe had not been prepared for. Further, they may or may not be the right person needed for a new cluster of parishes they are now responsible for.”

Understanding that the success of Renew My Church would hinge on a robust and engaged presbyterate, the archdiocese in 2021, committed itself to priest formation and development in an effort called “Leading in a Renewed Church.”

This program was specifically tailored and customized for the archdiocese from a pilot revitalization process developed by CLI known as “Called for More.” This collaborative effort was led by Jim Klein, formerly a chief executive at Kraft, and Fr. Ken Simpson who was in charge of priest formation.

“In executing Leading in a Renewed Church, we were establishing a foundation that would lead to deep-seated and long-lasting benefits for the Presbyterate,” said Lenz.



The Archdiocese of Chicago’s Leading in a Renewed Church effort was initiated to ensure that each priest’s lifetime commitment is fully and uniquely honored, supported, equipped and vitalized. The effort focused on four key areas:

- Ongoing Priest Leadership Formation
- Priest Placement and Succession Planning
- Priest Talent Development
- Coaching/Mentoring.

Teams from the archdiocese and CLI collaborated to tailor CLI's Called for More initiative to the unique size, scope and organizational structure of the archdiocesan renewal effort. Called for More is a multi-year revitalization that uses data and analysis of ministry to provide Church leaders with focus and courage to engage the culture with an apostolic mindset, creating a space for clergy to recall and live the joy of their ministry and forming them to be more intentional with those they serve for and with.

"The goal in Called for More is to help priests grow in self-awareness for where some of their natural gifts and passions are in ministry," said Dan Cellucci, Chief Executive Officer, Catholic Leadership Institute.



CLI provides bishops, priests, religious, deacons, lay persons in the Roman Catholic Church with world-class, pastoral leadership formation and consulting services that strengthens their confidence and competence in ministry, enabling them to articulate a vision for their local Church, to call forth the gifts of those they lead, and to create more vibrant faith communities rooted in Jesus Christ.

"So often, we treat priests all the same, and God gave them unique personalities, unique stories and journeys, and special gifts that serve a diverse Church like Chicago," said Cellucci.

THE CALLED FOR MORE PROCESS



Catholic Leadership Institute's Called for More process which served as the foundation for the Archdiocesan Leading in a Renewed Church initiative revolutionizes the discernment, appointment, and transition of priests through intentional, research-based, and faith-filled attention to:

- 1 Innovative Technology Integration:** Parishes participate in assessments via CLI's Disciple Maker Index™ (DMI) survey and priests within the archdiocese participate in a deep personal assessment.
- 2 Priest Placement:** Intentional strategic placement for priests within the archdiocese aligns their gifts and skills with identified parish needs. Personalized support and tools are provided to further foster those talents.
- 3 Growth Plans:** Pastors and parishes within the archdiocese have the tools to formulate individualized, long-term growth plans to help priest transitions, and to lead and establish a parish vision.
- 4 Personalized Support:** Sustaining resources include guidance in creating and utilizing targeted roadmaps for self-care, mentorship, coaching and professional development are available to priests within the archdiocese.

This data-driven effort prioritizes the care for a priest's corporal and spiritual needs, fostering leadership, education, and vitality so that priests are equipped to care for the parishes they shepherd. Called for More builds and refines a healthier, comprehensive pastoral placement, support and transition process in the Catholic Church. Fulfilling this mission requires research, development, facilitation, innovation, and coaching that inspires exponential impact for dioceses, priests and parish leaders.

“We also know that any authentic Catholic leader is committed to ongoing formation, to sharpening his or her saw, so we hope through our various tools such as the priest leadership inventory and coaching, a priest can grow in appreciation of where he feels called by God to continue his pursuit of excellence in ministry,” said Cellucci.

In the Leading in a Renewed Church effort, each priest begins by completing a Priest Leadership Inventory from Catholic Leadership Institute. This inventory asks priests about ministry preferences, how they believe the Holy Spirit is calling them to minister, what their gifts and skills are and an identification of any challenges.

“The Priest Leadership Inventory (which gathers up-to-date information on priests, their pastoral preferences and their behavioral strengths and styles) is something the archdiocese would have had to otherwise create from scratch,” said Klein.

Priests are then given a summary of their responses along with recommendations that forecast their abilities and possible future challenges. Each priest then develops a growth plan through the lens of the three identities of a parish priest – disciple, shepherd and steward.

Through the collaboration between CLI and the archdiocese, for the first time, planners within the archdiocese could more closely align a priests’ own capabilities and goals with the needs in the field. “Priest placement is so key,” said Fr. Michael Knotek. “If you put a priest in a place where his unique skills are not going to be used, it is going to be deadly. He is not going to be enthusiastic.”



We are very grateful for the relationship. It enabled the Renew My Church initiative to move from reorganization to evangelization, and Catholic Leadership Institute was an essential part of the process.

–Fr. Kenneth Simpson



KEY LEARNINGS

The key to the early success of the renewal effort in the Archdiocese of Chicago is the priority given to the ongoing formation for priests through Leading in a Renewed Church. Fr. Knotek said, “We have to be very deliberate in spending time to help the guys get in touch with what their dream of priesthood is and how to encourage them and provide them with the resources and support for them to improve in an area they want to pursue.”

He continued, “We are at a point where we just keep making the invitation and encouragement to say we are here to support you and provide what you need.”

Teams from the archdiocese and Catholic Leadership Institute collaborated onsite together, to build this foundation. This leads to deep-seated and long-lasting benefits for the presbyterate including:



- Improved morale as archdiocesan priests are experiencing a renewed commitment to their priestly development,
- A greater supply of priests capable of leading the Church in the archdiocese skillfully in the new missionary age,
- Enhanced and more frequent feedback to help address opportunities and challenges priests in the archdiocese experience during their priesthood.
- Successful application of CLI's tools within large and complex diocese (3rd largest in the country) with highly-skilled and well resourced diocesan staff.

- Strengthened vocational recruitment as candidates witness the strong commitment by the archdiocese to the continuing growth of their vocation;
- More proactive succession planning which enables impactful priest placement in the archdiocese.

“I look at a lot of what I am doing by either keeping priests connected to their original seal for priesthood or reconnecting them with that,” said Fr. Knotek.

Disciple Maker Index and Priest Leadership Inventory Tools

Central to Catholic Leadership Institute's Called for More initiative in the Archdiocese of Chicago was the administration of two surveys during Lent 2023:

- **The Disciple Maker Index** is a survey tool inviting parishioners within the archdiocese to reflect on where they are on their journey of discipleship and enables parish leadership to make data-driven decisions to help parishioners grow in their faith.
- **The Priest Leadership Inventory** is a questionnaire that asks priests in the archdiocese about where they prefer to minister, how the Holy Spirit is calling them to minister in the future, what their gifts and skills are and what they identify as their personal challenges.

At the time, “Catholic Leadership Institute was field testing its Disciple Maker Index and Priest Leadership Inventory and folks in the archdiocese found these tools to be highly effective,” said Lenz.

THE INVITATION

“Sometimes parish ministry can be unaffirming in the sense that it is a bottomless pit,” said Fr. Knotek. “The work is never done. The phone is always ringing. The doorbell is always ringing, and it is hard, especially with a priest shortage. They oftentimes cannot catch their breath.”

“We are working to affirm the skills they have and sharpen their awareness. Some are good with finances and others are not,” said Fr. Knotek. “Some are fine preachers and others are not. Some are fine in staff development and other priests are not.”

Ongoing Support

Here are a few ways in which archdiocesan priests are being supported in their ministry as a result of this collaboration:

- Catholic Leadership Institute developed a three-hour session for priests who are leading the unification of two or more parishes. These interactive sessions geared specifically for priests focused on change management skills, best practices and lessons learned from fellow priests.
- Catholic Leadership Institute worked with the archdiocese in developing an Evangelization Foundations course led by the Director of Evangelization for the Archdiocese of Chicago.
- Catholic Leadership Institute also worked with the Archdiocesan Parish Operations and Human Resources teams to develop the Pastoral Leadership of a Parish Staff Module for archdiocesan priests as part of an integrated process to enhance pastor-staff parish leadership. Topics covered include onboarding processes, vision, mission and strategy development; pastor acculturation; and conflict resolution skills.
- Support of priests in the archdiocese continues with lifelong training, life-stage training and specific milestones of Renew My Church. Catholic Leadership Institute supports Priest Growth Plans to help with development of diocesan priests, providing coaches for professional development and leadership growth.

Catholic Leadership Institute facilitated a successful and ongoing renewal initiative in the Archdiocese of Chicago. “It moved us forward five years in our process,” said Fr. Kenneth Simpson, recently retired vicar for pastoral and professional development of priests for the Archdiocese of Chicago, who prior to retirement worked on the “Leading in a Renewed Church” effort and now collaborates with Catholic Leadership Institute to ensure the archdiocesan renewal and Leading in a Renewed Church continues to bear fruit.



While it is early in implementation to share comprehensive findings, the archdiocesan “Renew My Church” and the “Leading in a Renewed Church” efforts show great promise. “We are very grateful for the relationship. It enabled the Renew My Church initiative to move from reorganization to evangelization, and Catholic Leadership Institute was an essential part of the process,” said Fr. Simpson. “The national data we can compare to and the learnings that Catholic Leadership Institute has had over the years, their vast experience and their ability and willingness to work with us has been really positive and helpful to us.”

Fr. Knotek shared, “They were great in making it work for us and our unique situation. The archdiocesan partnership with Catholic Leadership Institute has helped our priests embrace the change better than anything else.”

Sources:

1. Renew My Church Brochure, Archdiocese of Chicago
2. Archdiocese of Chicago, Internal October Count trends
3. Archdiocese of Chicago, Department of Strategic Planning and Implementation
4. Archdiocese of Chicago, Department of Strategic Planning and Implementation
5. Chicagoland article of 11/15/23



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–Fr. Michael Knoetk

